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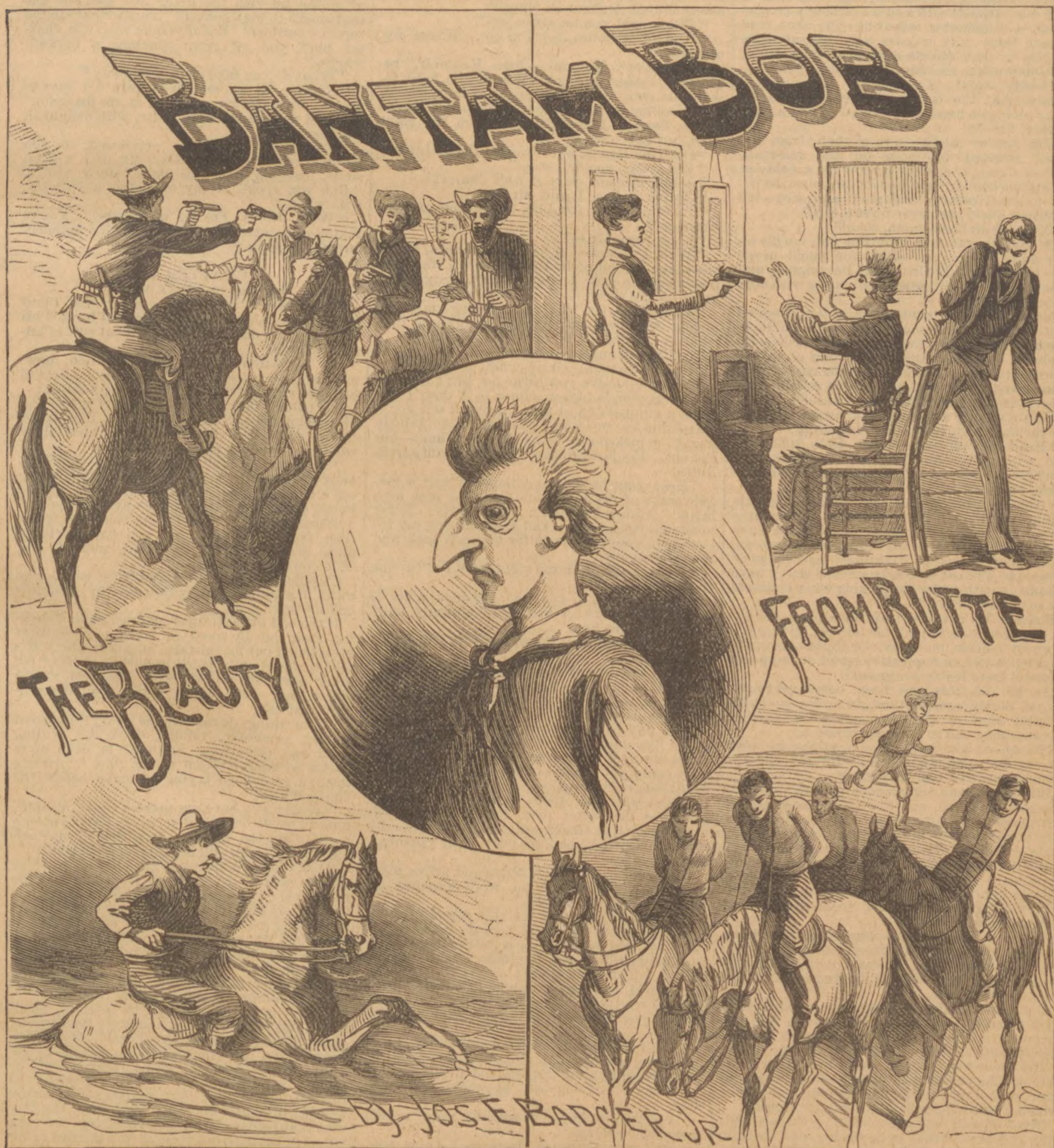
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THE BEAUTY FROM BUTTE.

Bantam Bob,

THE BEAUTY FROM BUTTE;

OR,

THE STEER BUCCANEERS.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "OLD '49," "MONTE JIM," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

MORE CHAFF THAN WHEAT.

"WHOA, January!"

A sharp jerk on the bridle-reins brought the red-roan to a halt, so abrupt that his tail brushed the ground and his unshod hoofs scored the dry, sun-baked earth, sending a little wave of dust and dirt ahead of horse and rider.

That rider's pistol-hand came up just as swiftly, jerking a revolver from the spring-top scabbard at his right hip, while his big blue eyes peered over the flitting foretop and pointed ears of the red-roan horse, taking swift note of the totally unexpected obstacle which barred his path.

Four horsemen, one slightly in advance, the other three spread out as though to guard against a desperate attempt to run the blockade.

All were armed, with a brace of heavy revolvers and a Winchester repeating rifle each, and at least three ugly muzzles were turned more squarely in that direction as the latest comer made his warlike movement.

"Steady, lads! And flag of truce, *you!*" quickly cried the leader, flinging upward an empty and open hand. "No need to pull a gun, pardner, for—"

"I'm not so mighty sure o' that, from the looks," retorted the man on the red-roan. "When a gang o' critters lay low for a hold-up, and an honest man only finds it out when he begins to smell powder and plumbago, why—it's shoot in a hurry, or never bust a cap."

"You are an honest man, then?"

"If you want to even hint I'm not, buckle on your gaffs before you crow, for you'll never have time after. I'm little, but I'm mighty, and I never yet— Now, what's the matter with you, Johnny Raw?"

One of the rear rank gave a low, amused snicker, leaning far enough over in his saddle to give his left-hand partner a dig in the ribs with an elbow, no doubt with the intention of calling notice to the almost ridiculous contrast between speaker and sentiment—the one so warlike, the other so insignificant, in a physical sense.

With a clumsy affectation of terror, the fellow shrunk away, hurriedly whispering:

"Head him off, somebody! He's full-feathered, with gaffs a foot long an' sharp a'cordin'! Don't let him come—an' me jest a sickly, fuzzy-chick, which—"

"And dung-hill bred at that!" cut in the little stranger, in tones of lofty contempt. "My eyes are surely going back on me, or I'd never have made such a mistake as to think *you* gamecocks. Shoo, poor critters! Fighting's not in your breed, and I'm not so nearly starved that I have to take up with such poor picking while buzzards are so plenty. Shoo!"

Pushing the revolver back into place, the little stranger snatched off his felt hat, giving it a scornful flourish, much as one might attempt to frighten away an inquisitive pullet or impudent cockerel from forbidden ground.

As he did this, the roan horse nervously turned partly around, thus giving the quartette a fairer view of the personage whose careless advance they had so abruptly checked.

His age might have been anything between twenty-five and forty, but with the chances leaning toward a half-way mark.

His height was but an inch or two over the five-foot standard, and his build was anything but massive. At first glance one would place him in the feather-weight class, but that estimate would call for correction after a closer examination, and only a test of the scales would convince a stranger of the truth: that the little fellow's fighting weight would barely admit him into the light-weight class, from a prize-ring point of view.

To use a somewhat hackneyed expression, he was one of those deceptive persons who "strip big." In other words, it was not until actually taken hold of, that his real size and weight could be accurately told.

But, none of this speculation was indulged in by the quartette, just then, and for the first few moments never an eye among them all touched the little stranger lower than his throat.

His face was utterly devoid of beard, his skin looking clear and smooth as that of an infant, with a rosy flush upon his plump cheeks of which a ball-room bell might have felt proud.

That seemed his sole charm, however. His chin appeared weak and receding, and his forehead sloped abruptly backward, both defects being emphasized by his phenomenally prominent nose.

That organ was large enough for a giant, but its size was not its only characteristic. It was curved like the beak of an eagle, and though starting from a generous enough base, was sharp and bony at its bridge, while the flexible nostrils opened and shut, almost as if made of rubber.

The sun had left the rest of his face untouched, but seemingly because it found enough to do with that nose, rather than through idleness. The tip was fairly purple, as though on the point of breaking into a painful blister, and from thence the color gradually grew less brilliant until the face itself was reached.

Guarding this truly phenomenal feature, were two blue eyes, deep blue as to hue, and keen as to expression, but so large and protuberant as to lend the face an owl-like look.

His hair was of a brilliant red, and being cut "pompador" fashion, rising along the apex of his skull like a cock's comb, seemed particularly appropriate to one who, judging from his words alone, was more than partial to the cock-pit and its peculiar slang.

"A bantam cock, by glory!" laughingly exclaimed one of the posse, and from the grim smile which crept into the leader's face at that moment, it was plain that the odd likeness had not escaped his keenly searching gaze.

"Thank ye for nothing, common truck!" retorted the little stranger, eclipsing that brilliant comb with his hat, cocked at a rakish angle. "A bantam to look at, maybe, but if you ever meet me in a buckle with the gaffs on, you'll swear I'm an elephant on wings!"

"Who might you be, stranger?"

"I *might* be Satan, but I'm not. Whose dog are *you*?"

"My name's Kenmuir—John Kenmuir," replied the leader, giving a shake of the head toward his men, either in reproof or in warning. "I'm looking for the Pea-vine Ranch, run by one Julius Payne. I thought I was on the right road, but now—am I?"

"Pea-vine Ranch, eh?" drawled the little man.

"Yes. Can you tell me—"

"Julius Payne? Sure it isn't Ceaser?"

"Julius Payne, I said, sir."

"Painful name for Jule, don't you reckon, stranger?"

"Look here, Mr.—"

"Well, I've looked at handsomer mugs, but if you make a point of it, I reckon I can stand the pressure yet a little longer. Don't charge anything for the show, do you, Johnny?"

"Look here, sir," his voice taking on a suspicious sternness, as he gazed keenly into that odd face, *you're* not Julius Payne, are you?"

The little stranger hesitated for a moment, but then replied with an air of conscious virtue:

"I might deceive you, stranger, but I scorn to lie, unless there's bigger money in it than I can catch a glimpse of just now. I might tell you I was Julius Payne—and I do reckon a worse body might be picked out in a long day's hunt—but I'm not. I'm just Bantam Bob, the Beauty from Butte!"

"Keep your hats on, gentlemen," with a languid wave of his pistol-hand, his ruby nose high in air. "I'm not proud, if I am pretty. Never mind cheering, even. And as for kissing my toe—well, this isn't my week for taking a bath, and the results—eh?"

"Can you set us on the right road to Pea-vine Ranch?"

"Can I—well, if you had the good sense to keep it when once set aright," dubtingly murmured Bantam Bob.

"Will you guide us there, then?" in still sharper tones.

"Will I make anything by going so far out of my way, comes heap sight nearer the bull's-eye. And then, too, how can I tell that Payne wants your company, just now?"

"I'll pay you your price, of course," coldly added Kenmuir. "Now, which way first?"

Bantam Bob gave a wry grimace at this masterly assumption, but as his goggle-eyes flashed over those ready weapons, and took fresh note of the men who held them, he evidently deemed prudence the better part, for, wrenching his horse around, he struck out at nearly right angles with the course he had recently been pursuing, saying easily:

"All right! We'll talk terms and prices, after you've seen how much the work amounts to. Friend of Payne's, maybe?"

"If familiar enough to call myself friend, would I have to ask if *you* were the man?"

"Well, you needn't snap a fellow's nose off. I just happened to ask, but now I take another look, I might have spared my wind. Julius is high-toned, and mighty particular about who he puts down upon his visiting-list, but—well, maybe you're not to blame for that, poor fellow!"

A half-smothered snicker came from one of the posse, and Kenmuir flushed hotly, none the less because Bantam Bob seemed innocently unconscious of having said anything out of the way.

"Don't try to be too funny, my man," gruffly came the warning.

"If I was to be as funny as I know how, stranger, you'd never get over it without help," complacently added the little fellow. "Still, if

you're soberly inclined, I can turn my coat according. All it needs is a guiding hint, and I'm right there, comb up and tail a-fluttering!"

"Talk less and do more. Touch up that crow-bait of yours, and get a livelier move on. How far is it to the Pea-vine?"

"A right smart bit and a little piece over, boss, making a guess that you mean the ranch-house itself."

"Of course I mean the house, since I'm after Payne. He'll be there, of course?"

"He generally is when he's at home, yes," assented Bantam Bob, rising in his stirrups and shading his eyes with a curved palm for a brief space. "Yonder's a bunch of 'em, now."

"Bunch of—nothing but cattle!"

"You didn't suppose Julius herds his hoofs and horns together, did you, man?" asked the Bantam, with a sniff of half-contempt as his protuberant eyes flashed from and back to the distant bunch of stock. "If that's your idea of running a stock-ranch, you'll be a holy picnic to the rustlers who— Ahem!"

"What's that about rustlers?" sharply demanded Kenmuir, catching the significant term, despite the fit of coughing with which the little fellow tried to cover his verbal slip. "Have the Steer Buccaneers been getting in some more of their dirty work?"

"The Steer— Oh, tumble over your feet! Who's been stuffing you with that ancient wind-pudding, pardner?"

"There's nothing in the reports, then?"

"Too mighty much in it, unless your nose is all stuffed up with the grip. It's gas, and gas that smells to high heaven! That's what's in the reports, pardner! But if you let such idle chatter bluff you off from clinching a bargain when—"

"What do you take me for, anyway?"

"Nothing at all, and even then I'd hate to swear I wasn't getting cheated in the bargain," declared the Beauty from Butte, with delightful frankness.

"Fools and babies are privileged, so you needn't dodge," retorted Kenmuir, with a grim smile creeping over his dark, stern visage. "But you spoke of my clinching a bargain; with whom?"

"With Julius Payne, of course. You're taking a squint at the Pea-vine, with a notion of buying, I reckon?"

CHAPTER II.

AT THE PEA-VINE RANCH.

THERE was a brief silence after that blunt question, and John Kenmuir glanced toward his comrades like one at a loss just what sort of answer to give.

His hesitation was of brief duration, however, and his voice took on a more social note as he answered that question by asking another:

"Wouldn't that be another case of a fool and his money, friend? If an old hand like Julius Payne can't keep his stock safe, what show would a greenhorn of my caliber do?"

"Who says he can't keep his stock safe?" almost indignantly cried the Bantam, flinging out a hand as he called attention to yet another bunch of grazing cattle, far away over the undulating range. "Could anything be safer than *that*? Where could you find anything more peaceful, more contented, more— Oh, slide down the water-spout!"

Clapping spurs to his horse's ribs, Bob broke away in a gallop, closely followed by Kenmuir and his three men.

If the odd little stranger had thoughts of shaking them off by speed of horse foot, he must have found out his mistake, in short meter. His mount was already jaded, and while those of the other party showed signs of long and steady riding, they were clearly better than the red-roan that day.

"Some things do make me so weary!" declared Robert, presently, reining down his willing steed and permitting Kenmuir to once more gain a sociable position at his side. "Among them, a greenhorn trying to make believe he knows it all!"

"Would you have me make a trade, unsight, unseen, as we boys used to say? Even you can hardly have the cheek to deny that stock-stealing has been, and still is going on up this way?"

"Oh, of course there's a little lifting, as there always will be where stock is plenty and the range wide, but that merely gives a man time to count up his profits. If there were no losses, no trifling backsets, don't you see, a fellow'd never find figures enough to name his riches. Talk about John Jay Astorbiltgould? Why, man dear, if—"

"I'd rather talk about Julius Payne," interposed Kenmuir. "He's growing rich, then?"

"Growing? He's full grown already, pardner! Talk about rustlers, and Steer Buccaneers, and thieving in hoofs and horns! Why, man dear, if you can climb up high enough to get Julius to put a price on his ranch at all, be mighty sure it's not because he's weakened through losses from *that* quarter, but because he's already made so much money off the Pea-vine that he hasn't time for anything else save hatching up schemes to spend the interest of his money! Fact, for I'm saying it!"

"And you never exaggerate, of course!"

"Not unless I see bigger money in it than in sticking to the naked truth," frankly declared the Beauty.

"Has Payne engaged you to boom his property, then?"

"Don't you think it, neighbor. For one thing, the property don't need booming. For another, I haven't been in the vicinity long enough for Payne to get acquainted with my talents in that direction."

"For a new-comer, you seem to be pretty well posted. Or, is it only seeming?"

Without deigning an answer to this insinuation, the Bantam turned down a shallow valley, riding briskly for a few minutes, rising in his stirrups and casting keen looks around. Then, drawing rein once more as they came in sight of yet another bunch of cattle, he said:

"Does that look as though I lacked information, Mister Man? Ask me who owns those horns, and I'll tell you, Julius Payne. Ask me what brand each and every head of 'em bears, and I'll tell you a letter P, with a quirky-que following, that folks call a vine. Join the couple, and there you have the Pea-vine. Then ask me—"

"Where's the ranch-house? Curse the cattle! It's the man I'm looking for, can't you understand?"

John Kenmuir spoke harshly, and as Bob turned a gaze of mild reproof toward the impatient stranger, he caught sight of a black muzzle staring him squarely in the face.

"Oh, I say!" he ejaculated, lifting an elbow to guard his head, but peering around with protruding eyes which seemed fascinated by that revolver-muzzle.

"You've said entirely too much, and now it's do or die!" retorted Kenmuir. "The naked truth; do you know the way to the Pea-vine Ranch?"

"Of course I do, but—"

"That's enough. Lead the way there, by the most direct route. If I catch you trying to trick me—well, even *your* cheek is hardly proof against a forty-four!"

Seemingly cowed by this summary suggestion, the Bantam turned his horse to the right, visibly shivering as he found that weapon keeping time to his movements.

"If you don't mind— If you'd just draw head on some less sensitive subject, boss!" he intimated.

"Will you guide us to the Pea-vine, then?"

"When you ask in such a gentlemanly manner, how can I help it?"

The Beauty forced a smile, but it gave the grinning posse far more pleasure than himself.

John Kenmuir replaced his weapon, as he added:

"All right, my man; up she goes. But, don't let it slip your memory that I can draw and shoot center heap sight quicker than you can run away, if you're fool enough to try that trick on."

"Why should I try to run away?"

"I'm not saying, just now. All I know is that you've promised to point out the Pea-vine Ranch to us. Do *that* much, and, then maybe we'll talk over the next thing. The ranch first, though."

For several minutes Bantam Bob led the way in silence, though it was plain to be seen his pride was chafing against such submission. More than once he flashed a sullen glance from face to face, but if he thought of open rebellion, the odds against him doubtless seemed too heavy.

John Kenmuir, now that he felt satisfied he was in a fair way to gain his main point, grew more friendly so far as looks went, and after awhile he found his voice:

"How many men does Payne usually keep about his ranch, Bob?"

"Depends on the season, of course."

"Average it, then."

"From half to a dozen. If you are making a raid—well, you can count me out of it! You haven't got enough to lick the boys, let alone run off stock, too!"

"Run off stock? What do you take me for, anyway, confound you?"

"A gentleman, of course, and if you get mad at my lying, how can I help it?" desperately blurted the little fellow. "One or even a couple, but four in a heap is—funny, ain't it?"

Kenmuir joined the laugh which burst from his med at that odd explosion, and the Bantam glared from face to face, his own turning red with poorly suppressed rage. For a single breath it really seemed as though he would jerk forth his weapons and dare those odds; but before he could fairly make up his mind to that effect, Kenmuir spoke again:

"Don't show yourself a greater idiot than nature branded you, Bantam Bob, since you fancy that title. We're not rustlers, nor do we intend troubling any of the four-footed stock on the Pea-vine. We simply wish an interview with Julius Payne, and being strangers in these parts we have gone so far astray that we felt the need of a living guide. You happened to be first to come in our way, so—understand?"

"What is your object in seeking such an interview?"

"I'll tell Payne that, Robert, when you've

brought us face to face. Of course we'll find him at the ranch?"

"We will if we do, but if we don't, how can I help it?" sulkily muttered the little guide, pricking up his jaded steed once more.

Seemingly his pride had received too sore a hurt for a rapid recovery, and possibly feeling that such information as he might extract from such an unwilling pilot would hardly be of the most reliable description, John Kenmuir asked no further questions, contenting himself with so disposing his men as to make escape on Bantam Bob's part an impossibility, should that worthy be so foolish as to make the effort.

Apparently nothing was further from the little man's intentions, for he maintained as direct a course as the nature of the ground, now growing less level and more broken, permitted, pricking on his tired mount without much mercy, only drawing rein when they topped a slight rise, to catch their first glimpse of the Pea-vine Ranch buildings.

These nestled in an irregular sort of vale, with rolling ground surrounding them, and trees scattered liberally through the lower levels.

John Kenmuir rose in his stirrups, shading his eyes with a hand as he gazed keenly upon the scene. Then a gruff exclamation broke from his lips, followed by the words:

"It looks deserted! No smoke, no life, no—what *does* it mean?"

"What did you expect?" curtly demanded Bantam Bob. "A dozen flags and a brass band? A circus on the roof-top, and a menagerie in the front door-yard? You see the Pea-vine, don't you gentlemen?"

"Yes, if that's the place."

"That's Julius Payne's place. I said I'd guide you to it. I've kept my word. Now—good-afternoon to you all!"

"Steady, there! What do you mean?"

A touch of spur and rein sent the red-roan backing until Bantam Bob had all four men in his front, then he crisply responded:

"I'm a gentleman, sir, even if you have treated me like a cur. I've gone far out of my way to do you a kindness, now—go to the devil, and I'll take the contrary direction!"

With the words, his hands gripped a brace of revolvers, the muzzles of which covered the party in business-like fashion.

"Stop, I say!" repeated Kenmuir, but the red-roan kept backing off, and Bantam Bob just as sharply added:

"Show your license, then, or own up that you're thugs! If the last, come and take me—if you know how!"

A touch of the spur and a little swaying of the body caused the red-roan to wheel about, Bantam Bob turning in the saddle far enough to keep the four men under his weapons the while.

Beyond a doubt he meant sober business, and John Kenmuir realized as much. It was a bitter pill to swallow, but he had bigger game in view, and, after all, Bantam Bob was pretty near in the right of it.

"All right, my pretty lad," Kenmuir assented, half-contemptuously. "I reckon I'll know you the next time we meet—and meet we surely will if you've played us dirt in this game. If you have, I'll rub your nose in it, clear to the hub!"

Bantam Bob was content to accept his victory without endangering himself by flinging back retort for threat, and without an answer the chief led his little squad down the slope toward the Pea-vine Ranch.

No words passed between them, for a glance was sufficient. Each man made sure his Winchester was in working order, then they rode briskly across the level, through the trees, and up to the front of the ranch building.

Not a sound greeted their coming, and the nearer they drew, the more complete appeared the desertion. And yet the place was in perfect order, as would hardly be the case had that desertion been final, or of long duration.

"Kin he hev ketched wind o' your comin', boss?" ventured one of the party, as they drew rein, only a few yards from the front of the house.

"Hardly. I can't see how he could," muttered Kenmuir, swinging himself out of the saddle, tossing his bridle-reins to the nearest man. "Take the nags to the stables, yonder, Jim, and give them a bite to eat. Whether or no our bird's here, we can't well go further without letting the critters breathe and pick a bit."

Two of the men alighted, also resigning their nags to the third man's care, then holding their rifles at a ready as they followed their leader direct to the front door.

With another keen glance around in quest of human life, John Kenmuir stepped upon the broad slab of stone which lay in front of the door, rapping sharply upon the barrier with his left hand.

His right hand was gripping a revolver-butt, as though he fully expected to be called upon to use that deadly weapon!"

CHAPTER III.

BANTAM BOB IN MISCHIEF.

FOR all he spoke so boldly, the Beauty from Butte was by no means anxious to have that defiance accepted, and even the most cautious of

generals could hardly have found fault with the manner in which he guarded his rear with the material at his disposal.

Thanks to his skill in the art of drawing, Le knew that even death itself could not prevent his having at least two shots at the enemy; but he knew, too, how hard it is to stop a man who means purely business with a bullet, no matter how surely sent; and all the while he was holding that defiant front, he was hoping with genuine earnestness that his little bluff might not be called by John Kenmuir.

He knew the man a vast deal better than the man knew him. Had this not been the case, very likely that risk would not have been taken, or, if taken, would have been coated with craft rather than defiance.

Still, the result seemed to justify his actions, and as an immediate rush failed to come, Bantam Bob began to doubt if it would come at all.

He kept on guard, however, backing his horse away until he felt that the animal might turn without exposing its master too greatly; and even then his caution was not relaxed in the slightest.

"Impudence is a mighty good hand to draw to, but Bull-dog John is bad to beat!" was one of the thoughts that flashed through his busy brain during those critical moments.

Open flight was out of the question, with the red-roan in his present condition. Long ere this Bantam Bob had satisfied himself on that point, and that conviction alone had postponed his break-away so long. Even if cartridges were not exploded, there could be but one ending to a race of that description.

Not daring to invite pursuit by hurrying his weary nag, Bantam Bob let the roan take his own gait while retreating, contenting himself with showing a bold front to John Kenmuir and his men.

His pulse beat a bit more quickly as the quartette turned toward the not distant ranch buildings, but his guard was more careful now than before.

"Trick for trick, is it, Johnny? Don't try it—don't you try it, I'm warning, man!"

Apparently there was no actual basis for this ugly suspicion, for John Kenmuir rode straight on, with eyes only for the Pea-vine Ranch and its immediate surroundings.

His men cast a glance or two backward, but they, too, appeared to quickly lose all interest in the odd little spitfire, and he was by no means anxious to call attention to that contemptuous neglect, just then.

With a celerity which might have seemed ludicrous in the eyes of a disinterested person, Bantam Bob took advantage of the nearest cover, sending his horse at a sharp angle behind a couple of trees which, with the rank grass and a few sprouts about their base, promised him fairly secure protection against both eyes and bullets, so long as he could keep the alignment perfect.

"Rack out, ye sinners!" came mutteringly as he twisted his neck for a fairer peep at the little squad of horsemen. "Just a little more leeway, then catch me who can!"

Personal fear was rapidly giving place in his eyes to curiosity on another's account, and doubtless if he had had time in which to fully empty his mind, Bantam Bob would have expressed wonderment as to why John Kenmuir was so bent on an interview with Julius Payne, the young and dashing master of the Pea-vine Ranch.

Only pausing long enough to make sure the horsemen were pressing directly for the buildings, apparently without a further thought concerning himself, the little horseman sent his mount onward at a brisker pace, heading so as to keep the twin trees squarely between danger and his own precious person.

The instant he could do so without running too great risk of calling dangerous notice his way, the Bantam altered his line of retreat, using his spurs as he passed behind the friendly swell in the ground.

Riding rapidly for a brief space, he sprang to the ground at the edge of a clump of small trees and bushes, turning the jaded animal loose for the moment, knowing that the roan would do little straying.

Pausing barely long enough to glance at his pistols, Bob ran lightly up the rising ground, heading for cover on the crest, bent on taking at least one more look at the enemy.

"What'll Bully Jack do? Cuss a blue streak, of course; but, what else? Surely he'll not dare— Look at him, will ye?"

Bantam Bob was doing just that, and so eagerly that his protuberant eyes seemed on the point of rolling down his cheeks instead of remaining in their sockets.

The little squad was drawing near the ranch-house, with John Kenmuir still in the lead, and even at that distance Bantam Bob could see that he held his revolver drawn.

"A bad man, spelled with a bumblebee! Look at Johnny! Gun in grip, hungry for a crack! Look at them: pump-guns ready to play lead in straight streams! What a holy picnic there'd be if the boss was only at home! If he only was!"

There was a faint echo of derisive triumph in his tones as Bantam Bob gave vent to these mutterings, but then a darker shade came into his odd-looking countenance as another thought occurred to him.

"If the boss isn't, mayn't somebody else be there? And if there is—steady, boy!"

The diminutive spy saw John Kenmuir swing himself out of the saddle and turn the horses over to one of his men, then advance with the two others as backers, direct to the front door of the building.

"Skin your knuckles rapping, old man!" muttered the Beauty, guessing at rather than seeing just what John Kenmuir was doing. "If anybody was at home, bet your sweet life you'd never have time to take all that trouble! Not much you wouldn't, for— What's the other critter up to, I want to know, though?"

Centering his gaze upon the man in charge of the animals, Bantam Bob neglected all others until that point was settled to his satisfaction.

He saw the fellow take the horses into the stables, and, long before Jim Dustin made his reappearance, the spy divined his purpose aright.

A single glance assured him that, by some means or other, the door had been opened and John Kenmuir had crossed the threshold, leaving his men on the outside, doubtless to give warning in case of need.

"Cool as ice in August! Raiding a gentleman's house, and making him furnish forage as well! If I only thought—well, why not?"

His eyes were now all aglow, his flexible, nostrils were twitching oddly, his small but muscular hands were working nervously. Rapidly his brain was turning over the chances for and against, but so strong was his interest that even before a decision was reached, the little fellow was advancing toward the stables into which the weary horses had been led.

The Bantam was not at all afraid of John Kenmuir's finding Julius Payne beneath that roof, or, indeed, upon the Pea-vine Ranch at all. He had known from the start that the ranch-owner was absent from home, and that each stride of their horses was but increasing the distance between the quartette and the person they sought.

He knew that the truth must sooner or later be learned by Kenmuir, but he had maneuvered to delay that discovery as long as possible, and now he was wondering whether or no he could not throw yet another obstacle in the path of enemy?

"It's well worth the risk, I do reckon!" he was telling himself as he crossed the rising ground and picked his course toward the stables, all the time taking care to utilize each bit of cover to the best advantage.

Only once did he pause outright, and that was when tall, gaunt Jim Dustin came out of the stables, to pause and sweep his keen gray eyes over that quarter of the view.

It could hardly be that he entertained even a suspicion of the truth, but little Bob crouched closely to earth while waiting and watching, ready to advance or to beat a hasty retreat, just as circumstances rendered most advisable.

"Flock with your mates, dung-hill!" muttered the Bantam, his face full of disgust at such unreasonable caution. "Make room for your betters, white-feather, or I'll be all over you in a holy minute!"

Seeing nothing to cause him uneasiness in that quarter, Dustin dropped his rifle into the hollow of his left arm, moving leisurely away from the stables in the direction of the house, and only waiting to see his back, Bantam Bob once more crept rapidly forward.

He gained the rear of the stable without meeting any further check, and peering around a corner, he caught a glimpse of an armed figure, apparently keeping guard in front of the building.

"While Kenmuir's searching inside, I reckon!" inferred the Beauty, a frown wrinkling his forehead. "By what right, I'd like to know? Who can have—surely John can't hold a warrant for rustling?"

That thought seemed anything but agreeable judging from the scowl on that odd visage, but Bob was stirred by it to more rapid action, as though it suggested fresh danger to him.

There were two methods of entering that particular stable, and electing the one which was hidden from view of the guards in front of the ranch-house, the Bantam quickly effected an entrance, and flashed his keen eyes over the principal contents: the four horses belonging to Sheriff Kenmuir and his posse, and one other, owned by Julius Payne: a large and powerful white gelding, which had but few superiors on all that range for speed or endurance.

Jim Dustin had merely slipped bits from the mouths of their mounts, leaving all other items in order, as though he expected their delay at Pea-vine Ranch to be but a brief one.

Their jaws free, the tired creatures were eating greedily from the lavishly-supplied mangers, and, as he saw this, Bob hesitated. Only for a moment. Then, drawing his keen knife, he fell to work.

He cut each broad girth nearly in twain, and

in the same manner weakened the leather straps by which the girths were "cinched" up.

He removed each pair of bits entirely, knotting them together with a pair of bridle-reins, then moving toward the front door, for a precautionary glance toward the house.

He could only catch a glimpse of a single man on guard, but as none of the others were coming his way, he cared precious little for that.

"Looks pretty low down, and mighty nigh like hoss-stealing," he mused, with a chuckle, while busying himself still further. "But, all's fair in love and war, the poet says, and Julius stands for one, just as surely as John Kenmuir stands for the other! If not, why'd he come at me so mighty trash? Why'd he make such a lively show of guns? Why's he here, just when he's wanted the least?"

Taking a silver-mounted saddle from the peg on which it rested in company with a bridle, Bantam Bob rapidly yet carefully placed both upon the white gelding, paying no attention to the uneasy movements of the intelligent creature, who seemed to feel something was going wrong.

It took but a few moments to equip the horse for the road, and then the Bantam stole across the stable for yet another glance toward the ranch building, just in time to catch a most unwelcome sight.

A number of armed men were coming toward the stables, and although he had failed to note his arrival, one of them surely was a cowboy employed by Julius Payne.

"Dollars to doughnuts he's blowed the gaff!" fiercely growled the little fellow, springing back and instinctively gripping a gun. "If I thought he hadn't yet, I'd—"

That sanguinary notion fled as quickly as shaped, and instead of trying to check the enemy by a display of force, Bob sprang to the head of the white gelding, leading him to the other door as though bent on seeking safety in headlong flight.

Indeed, no other course appeared open to him just then. His mischievous actions would surely be discovered as soon as the stable was entered, and with that horse ready saddled and bridled—

"I'd hang for a hoss-thief, dead sure!" he reflected, leaping into the saddle and dashing away at top speed, bending low in the saddle as he heard angry shouts from the rear.

And then bullets began to whistle!

CHAPTER IV.

BILLY JACKS, THE COWBOY.

WITH his unarmed hand, John Kenmuir rapped again, more heavily than at first, though he began to feel pretty sure the building was indeed deserted, for the time being if not for good.

No answer came to that summons, nor to those which, as an officer of the law, he felt in duty bound to give, after.

The echoes that alone came back did not sound hollow and prolonged as they always will from a dismantled room, and that fact gave the sheriff a touch of hope that, after all, his mission might not be entirely in vain.

"I reckon he's done racked out, boss," suggested one of his posse. "Ef anybody was in thar, sleepin' couldn't hender 'em ketchin' them knocks, I don't reckon!"

Kenmuir put up his gun, turning one of his broad shoulders toward the door, as though about to test its powers of resistance after that summary fashion. But then, with an after-thought, he grasped the knob and gave it a twist—to find the unlocked door give way to his touch!

With the instinctive caution of a practiced hand, who has long been accustomed to deal with desperate characters, Kenmuir stepped swiftly aside, out of range, whipping forth a pistol even as he muttered:

"Keep an eye out, Martin, and when Dustin comes, let him help you on guard. Halt and hold the drop on anybody who may come this way, then give me the old whistle. You understand?"

"To a t-y-ty, boss!"

"Good enough. You come with me, Harris. It's just as well to have a witness, I reckon."

With a thrust of a foot, the door was swung wide open, but no sound came back, and after waiting for a few seconds, John Kenmuir sprang swiftly through the opening, his gun poised ready for instant use in case of need.

That, too, proved to be a useless precaution, for not a living object was to be seen, nor was a human voice lifted to object to such an uncere-monious intrusion on their part.

For Tom Harris, equally armed, was close at the heels of his superior, ready and willing to back him up in all he might see fit to do.

"Looks mighty like a skin-out, boss," that worthy whispered as their flashing glances failed to discover aught of the man they had journeyed so far to place under arrest. "Reckon that little runt played us dirt in fetchin' us here?"

"No, I recognize the place from the description I had at the send-off," replied the sheriff, in like guarded tones. "This is the Pea-vine, easy enough, but as for Payne— Well, we'll look further."

Although everything went to show the only inmates of that building were themselves, John Kenmuir had been too long in office to take anything for granted when a little time and trouble could solve the point in doubt, and holding a pistol ready for use, he passed from room to room, his curiosity growing stronger as his investigation extended.

This house was something beyond his ideas of a cattle-ranch, both in size and furnishings, the latter in particular.

"Rustling stock and altering brands must pay right smart dividends, from the looks of things!" he observed, with a grim smile upon his dark, stern face as he took note of their surroundings.

An expression of half-disgust came into his deputy's face at that remark, and in tones to suit he ventured:

"Then it's only a case of rustling, sir? I thought—"

"Don't strain your brain by thinking, Harris," coldly interrupted the sheriff, once more busying himself with searching the apartment in which they then stood. "I'll take that part of the contract myself."

His deputy meekly submitted to that blunt reproof, and until both were fully satisfied the lower floor was unoccupied save by themselves, not another word was spoken by either.

Turning to the stairway which led to the upper floor, Kenmuir paused to say:

"I'll take a look aloft, Harris, though I don't reckon it's of much use. While I'm doing that, give yonder room a closer search."

"For somebody, or something, boss?"

"For papers, of course. If you find any, freeze to them until I've time for a glance over them. Written documents, I mean, of course."

Without explaining himself further, Kenmuir mounted the stairs, his revolver in hand, though that precaution was a mere matter of habit under the present circumstances. He was already convinced that Julius Payne was not to be found in that quarter, but it was a rule of his to take nothing for granted, simply to spare himself a little extra trouble.

Still, his pains were not entirely without reward, for if he failed to find the person for whom he was searching, he did find something which gave him fresh food for thought.

This was a chamber, so neatly, even richly fitted up with entirely fresh and new furnishings, that the surprise he felt while on the lower floor was more than doubled, up here.

Surely no ordinary cattle-man had ever use for such a dainty bedchamber as this.

"Looks more like a bridal-chamber!" muttered Kenmuir, pausing at the opened door, mechanically removing his hat, though this was quickly replaced as a hot flush leaped into his swarthy face. "Bah, you old fool!"

Nevertheless his feet lingered on the threshold while his eyes roved slowly over each dainty article of furniture.

Truly, as he had said in his surprise, this apartment did more nearly resemble a bridal-chamber, as yet unused, rather than what one might naturally expect to find beneath a cowboy's roof-tree.

And yet Kenmuir was confident he had made no mistake: he had certainly heard that Julius Payne, owner of the Pea-vine Ranch, was a bachelor. And with such a terribly dark cloud hanging over his head, he surely would never dare think of marrying and bringing his bride here to suffer an even worse penalty?

"If he does, he'd ought to have a round dozen of necks for the rope to bug!" grimly muttered the sheriff, as he stepped forward.

All milk-and-water sentiment was banished now, and John Kenmuir was once more the iron-nerved, stone-hearted officer of an outraged law.

He was the blind slave of duty at such times as this, and with only a thought of finding proofs which might possibly render his work the more thorough, Sheriff Kenmuir coolly and quickly overhauled the drawers in the handsome dresser, ruthlessly rumpling up the dainty furnishings, leaving not a practicable hiding-place unsearched, even while morally certain that even Julius Payne would hardly be evil enough to think of hiding the proofs of his black crime in such a bower of innocence.

"All the same, it's business, and that's what I'm sent here for. If I left even one hole unsearched, I'd have to come back to look into it. Don't I know? That's the way I'm built, and I can't help it."

Only in his mind did Kenmuir utter this apology, but when that hurried quest came to an end, he turned toward the open door with a long breath as of hearty relief.

As he did this, a low, tremulous whistle came from below, and as he sprang to the head of the stairs, he caught sight of Tom Harris just lifting a foot for the first step.

"What's it for, Tom?" swiftly asked Kenmuir, at the same time beginning the descent. "Anybody in sight?"

"I reckon so, boss. Weaver gave the office, and I just passed it on ahead o' me. I was coming—"

"And I'm going, so give way, man!" growled Kenmuir, brushing the deputy aside with his broad shoulders.

As he gained the front door, his first glance showed him Martin Weaver, rifle at his shoulder and eye glancing keenly along the bronzed barrel, keeping covered with his weapon a slouchy cowboy, who stood with both arms uplifted, a sulky snarl showing upon his sun-browned face.

"What is it, Weaver?" asked the sheriff, as he stepped upon the broad slab of stone, flashing a keen glance around at the same time.

"A man, I reckon, boss," came the reply. "Ketched him monkeyin' over this way, so I jest held the critter up an' give you the office."

"You did just right, old man, and I thank you for it. Now, sir, who may you chance to be?" he added, addressing the cowboy.

"Hain't no durn chaine 'bout it, fer me, 'pears like!" came the sour retort. "Gwine to hold me this-a-way all day?"

"Who are you?"

"Hafe-white an' free born, ef you know what that means."

"No impudence, if you please, my pretty fellow. You've got a name of your own; what is it?"

"Billy Jacks. Now, ef you're—"

"Please step this way, Mr. Jacks," politely interrupted the sheriff, with another one of his precautionary glances around the place. "I hate to strain my voice talking at long range, and then—shall I send a pair of boots to give you a lift, dear man?"

"Needn't mind," growlingly said the cowboy, starting forward, but without daring to lower his hands as long as that repeater kept him covered so surely. "I've got a couple o' my own, an' jest boofs 'nough to fill 'em up. An' I never *did* take to warin' of leather whar I rest easy when I sets down—I never *did*, now!"

"You're not half as big a fool as your looks would indicate, Mr. Jacks, and I reckon your folks knew best when they left the two extra letters out of your rear name. Now—where's Julius Payne?"

"Whar's— Who're you, to ax so many fool' questions?"

"I've had many a better man than you call me boss, Billy, and I've grown so accustomed to ruling the roost that it hardly sounds right when another fellow tries to ask questions. I'll say it once more: where's Julius Payne, owner of the Pea-vine Ranch?"

"Over to the Spectacle Ranch, o' course," growled the cowboy, adding with a coarse sneer: "Anybody'd tell ye *that* much!"

"One body *didn't*, though I asked plenty plain."

"Who was it?"

"He called himself Bantam Bob, the Beauty from Butte, but—"

"Faugh!" and the cowboy spat over a shoulder with an air of utter disgust. "That runt? He's no good—an' wuss, a heap!"

"Who, and what is he, then?"

"Waal, not knowin' for dead sure, I'm not in a hurry to say," hesitated the cowboy, all the while gazing keenly into that darkly powerful countenance, then abruptly adding: "I say, you're the sheriff?"

"If I am, what then?"

"Mebbe nothin', mebbe a mighty heap, jest a'cordin'. What do ye want o' the boss?"

"Business, Mr. Jacks. What's my nearest way to find him?"

"Waal, ef I was to say, it'd be this: the *easiest* way is jest to camp down right whar ye be, an' wait fer his gittin' back home."

"And by so doing, give him a longer chance to skip out?"

The cowboy gave a short, dry chuckle before saying:

"Ye couldn't skeer him 'way, boss! You couldn't keep him off o' this range ef ye hed a whip o' fire, an' every lash long's a *riata*!"

"But suppose I hold a still uglier hand against him, Billy?"

"Waal, it'd take a mighty sight to skeer the boss out, jest now," with a repetition of that peculiar laugh. "Even ef you— I say, boss, you're not after him 'long of a charge o' rustlin', be ye?"

Sheriff Kenmuir had not been talking idly, for all this time he had been carefully studying the face of this cowboy. He had nearly reached a conclusion, and while this summing up was hardly to the fellow's credit, for lawful reasons Kenmuir was glad to reach that point.

"If such *should* be the case, Billy, what would you say?"

"That I unly wish't was a durn sight nastier charge—that's all!"

"You don't love your boss, then, I judge?"

"He's guv me mighty sight o' 'casion, hain't he, then?"

"Not knowing can't say, but I reckon you're the next best thing to finding Payne. He's at the Spectacle Ranch, you say? Can you guide us there, for fair pay?"

"You didn't come afoot, shorely?" hesitated the cowboy, casting a half-puzzled glance around the place. "Ef you hed critters, why—"

"We have horses, in the stable yonder. Let up with your gun, Weaver. Billy is our guide, now, not an enemy, or a suspect. Get out the nags, men, and we'll be mogging along before it grows too dark."

As they approached the stables, Billy Jacks gave a sharp, angry cry, at the same time pulling a gun and opening fire.

CHAPTER V.

BANTAM BOB CROWS TOO SOON.

INSTINCT told the Beauty from Butte what to expect on discovery, and heading the white gelding toward the nearest cover on leaving the stable, the little fellow lay close along that neck, trying to reduce his scant dimensions still further as he caught that first angry shout.

A jerk at the reins turned the white horse sharply to the left, that change of course beginning just as Billy Jacks's revolver uttered its first note.

The grooved lead whistled ominously near the ear of the fugitive, and knowing from past experience how quickly sharpshooters will fall in tune with a moving target, Bantam Bob again jerked the reins, turning his fretting mount at another sharp angle, then digging spurs fiercely into flanks as he hissing spoke:

"Climb—climb out, ye overgrown snail! Show 'em your heels, or it's good-by— Look out, you blamed fool!"

Crack-crack-crack!

As rapidly as practiced finger could work the double-action, the cowboy's gun kept speaking until its cylinder was exhausted, but whether from natural lack of skill, or through dread of injuring a really valuable animal belonging to his employer, Billy Jacks failed to bring down his game.

Only one of his bullets came dangerously nigh the little horse-thief, and that only grazed an ear-tip as Bantam Bob turned his head for a backward glance at his enemies.

A shout of angry disgust burst from the Beauty as he nearly dislocated his neck by a swift flinching from that missile, but he saw enough to convince him only one man was using him as a target, so far.

Neither John Kenmuir nor any of his posse had fired a shot, as yet.

"My mighty good luck, too!" reflected the fugitive with a little shiver as he fancied those repeating rifles pouring their deadly volleys across that too brief space. "They'd mow down the very grass, and I wouldn't— Skin out, you critter!"

All this took place with bewildering rapidity, and while Bantam Bob had never once lost sight of his first impulse of dodging behind the most convenient cover, his double change of course had prevented his making use of the little patch of brush on which his gaze had fallen in the first place.

But now, while Billy Jacks was changing guns and cursing both at his lack of skill and his present companions for not joining in the attempt to check the flight of that audacious horse-thief, a vicious rake of those spurs sent the white gelding plunging around a clump of trees, then onward in a sheltered line.

For the first time since making his dash out of the stable, Bantam Bob began to feel as though escape with life was among the possibilities, and rising up in the saddle, he took a fair look backward.

Although the little clump of trees afforded him fair protection against bullets, the cover was not so dense as to entirely cut off his view, and as he saw the sheriff and his posse hastily entering the stable, doubtless for the purpose of securing means for pursuit, the little rascal gave a laugh and a crow of triumph at his forethought.

"Don't cuss too mighty loud, dear sheriff!" he muttered, sending his mount ahead like one who can fully realize the value of time and distance. "It's a low-down trick, I'll admit, but you earned it fairly by treating a gentleman like a cur: yes you *did*, now!"

A few more strides carried the fugitive to the crest of the swell, and as he swept over it, Bantam Bob waved his hat on high, giving a shrill, far-reaching crow of triumph.

He caught a glimpse of Billy Jacks gesticulating in a spasm of impotent rage, then the Pea-vine Ranch and its stables were shut out from his view by the swell as the white horse bore him rapidly onward.

"A fool' act, old man, unless you're just honing for a tail-on-end chase!" mused the little rogue, sweeping a gaze around like one who is far from being assured of his wisest course to pursue. "It's playing 'em dirt, then rubbing it in, to stick! Well, why not?"

A question far more easily asked than answered, judging from the darkening frown which crept over that peculiar countenance.

As his recent actions proved, Bantam Bob had powerful reasons for hindering Sheriff Kenmuir in his search for Julius Payne, even if he was unable to check it entirely.

When checked by the posse, he had been picking his way toward the "O—O" Ranch, where he knew full well Julius Payne was to be found at that time. Kenmuir had forced him to serve as guide to the Pea-vine, and Bantam Bob had drawn even that empty service out as long as possible, knowing that each minute gained was a minute won. Then—

"Luck had to turn crooked, and Johnny caught a puncher!" muttered the Beauty, in strong disgust as he gave his stolen mount a

vicious rake with his spurs. "Will he blow? You bet! Johnny'd make a dead man squeal, once his mad rises on top! And Billy Jacks— 'twas him, I'm thinking? Well, I wish 'twas a better man!"

Removing the bunch of bits from where they hung at his pommel, Bantam Bob gave them a swing and a toss, watching them sink out of sight in a patch of coarse grass far from his trail, then turned again for a look in the direction of the Pea-vine.

"Long shooting is wild shooting, and I *do* reckon this critter has got the heels of anything in the shape of horseflesh left handy to Bulldog John and his cohort. Almost wish I hadn't cut up quite so much mischief, though!"

If he could lure the enemy along his own track, mightn't he win Julius Payne yet another reprieve?

As that fancy struck him, Bantam Bob checked his steed, almost coming to a halt; but not for long.

Apart from the other mischief he had wrought during those few minutes, he knew he had lain himself open to a serious charge by taking possession of the white gelding: nothing less than horse-thief!

"And *that* means a rope, in these parts!" uncomfortably reflected the gentleman from Butte, once more setting his steed in rapid motion. "Without judge or jury, at that! Reckon I'm not hankering quite so much for a foot-race as I thought, first off!"

Although comparatively a stranger in that section, Bantam Bob had potted himself sufficiently to know that there was a "short cut" to Spectacle Ranch (as the O—O place was locally termed, from the shape of its brand) besides the regular route, and in spite of the danger which he could not help seeing he would thus incur, he doggedly stuck to his first resolve to warn Julius Payne of impending trouble.

"It's six for him and half a dozen for myself. I give him a chance to cheat the sheriff, and surely that'll let me out on the horse-stealing? It certainly *ought*, and with Payne as backer—wonder what Bull-dog John holds against the boss, anyway?"

That was a far from agreeable point, judging from the troubled frown which came into the little fellow's face as he rode briskly on.

Brief as had been his sojourn in that section, the Bantam surely must have found out something concerning the curse of the range: stock-lifting, brand-burning, rustling in general. And now his thoughts were busy enough, weighing points pro and con.

"He's a sheriff. He's got an armed posse with him. He's red-hot anxious to meet up with the Pea-vine owner. What does all that count up? That he holds a warrant for Payne, or I'm a howling idiot!"

"For what? Anything worse than rustling? Can be—wonder if he reckons the gang'd let him rake in the head-center, like that? Provided Payne is that worthy, of course!"

Bantam Bob broke off his musings with a low chuckle, then settled himself firmly in the saddle, taking a keen, sweeping glance around like one who is hardly as well acquainted with his immediate surroundings as could be wished, yet who was resolved to win, or die trying.

"Yes, or no, what matter? I'm duty bound to warn the boss of coming trouble, and if I can get there in time, he'll have a chance to fight or to flee, just as he thinks best. Pick foot, Whitey! We want to cross the river before dark catches us, and I reckon you'd ought to be better acquainted with the ford than I am—worse luck!"

Satisfied now that the posse was unable or unwilling to chase him, Bantam Bob gave no further thought to that quarter, turning all of his attention the other way.

He knew the river lay in his path, and he knew that there were several fording places at no great distance apart. There was nothing like a regular trail to be seen as he glanced from side to side, but he placed considerable faith in animal instinct, and trusted the white horse would take him to one of those crossing-places.

"If not, you've got to do the swimming for both, old fellow!" he grimly remarked, giving over that vain quest. "It's mighty few things I take a back-seat on, but this is one of them. I can swim like a rock, and dive like a feather!"

The fact that no chase of himself had been made, only confirmed Bantam Bob in his belief that the cowboy had betrayed his master, either voluntarily or through the strong hand of Sheriff Kenmuir; and feeling most strongly the necessity for haste if he was to succeed in his purpose of warning Julius Payne of impending trouble before it could fairly overwhelm him, it is hardly to be wondered at that something suspiciously like an oath parted the little fellow's lips as he drew rein on the river-bank: for surely this was no regular fording-place!

"Looks plenty deep to drown a giant!" he muttered, uneasily, sweeping the placid surface with an anxious glance, then scanning the opposite shore as far as his vision could reach. "Not a sign of a ford. Confound you, critter! if you wasn't borrowed, so to speak, I'd empty your skull in search of brains—then never find a trace!"

Although bold enough in other respects, Bantam Bob held an inherited dread of water, other than as a servant to thirsty or cleanly men. He dreaded to risk a crossing here, although he knew his horse could easily swim tenfold as far with such a light burden on his back. Yet, could he afford to waste precious time in searching for a regular ford?

"I've got to warn the boss—just got to!" he doggedly muttered, settling himself in the saddle and drawing a long breath. "Kenmuir's pulling hot-foot for the Spectacle Ranch, and I just know it! I mightn't hit a ford in half an hour, and that'd be everlastingly too late. So—well, as a horse-thief I'm born to be hung, and they do say that's a sure charm against drowning!"

It called for more courage than he had displayed in braving the wrath of Sheriff Kenmuir and his posse, but Bantam Bob spurred his uneasy mount down the bank and into the river, catching his breath with a gasp of fright as the second plunge carried them beyond their footing, causing the white gelding to swim strongly.

Robert shut his eyes and clung with a vise-like grip to the pommel, sorely scared, yet with wit enough left to give his horse full liberty, knowing that brute instinct would surely aid it best.

Rising from the plunge that buried all save its nostrils, the good steed gave a mighty snort, then struck out rapidly for the further shore, that light weight upon its back permitting head and neck to rise fairly well above the surface.

One less afraid of drowning than was the Bantam, would have gently slipped out of the saddle, floating alongside the creature, but not so the little rider; his eyes were closed, his lips screwed up, his face unnaturally pale as he fairly held his breath in sore suspense.

Then the gelding struck bottom, scrambling forward and upward as though a secure landing was gained, and with a gasp of intense relief Bantam Bob opened his eyes—to give a cry of surprise.

The river was hardly half crossed, and apparently the horse had struck a bar, formed by a divided current. That must be the case, for only a short distance ahead of them, the river flowed rapidly and smoothly, plainly of greater depth than—

"Steady, boy!" cried Bob sharply, catching at the reins as his mount gave a stumble that drove its nose below the surface. "If you can't stand up when—Lord above!"

Instead of regaining its balance, the poor creature plunged and struggled even more wildly, snorting sharply, flinging its head upward, only to fall forward again as though—

"Quicksand!" gasped the alarmed Bantam, spurring and lashing most desperately. "Git up, you! Now—good boy! Skin out, you brute!"

A series of still wilder plunges, but not a yard of advance, and then, with a pitiful groan, the white horse ceased its vain struggles.

CHAPTER VI.

CAUGHT IN A DEATH-TRAP.

MUCH the same sort of despair seized upon Bantam Bob, just then.

The terrible truth came to him all at once, yet his wits were clear enough to realize that if escape was possible at all, that desperate effort would certainly have set the white horse free, then and there.

As the poor creature ceased its vain struggles for the moment, its rider mechanically took note of their depth: the water came nearly halfway up the side of his horse.

"How long'll it take to sink—Get up! you've got to climb out!"

Under lashing reins and raking spurs, the doomed animal renewed its furious struggles, fighting for dear life with an energy deserving a better reward; but now, as before, all was in vain. Those deadly particles had gained a fair grip, and each plunge only rendered their victory the more sure, the more sudden.

As another pause of exhaustion came, the Bantam shivered with far more than the chill lent by the element itself. He drew up his feet, out of the stirrups, as he felt that strange, slippery, yet clinging touch of the pitiless sands. Drops of clammy sweat started out upon his temples as he saw how much lower the poor horse lay in the water.

Brief though that struggle had been, nearly six inches had been lost!

At that rate, how long would it be before both horse and rider were drawn below the smothering waters?

"To drown—like a dog!"

Bantam Bob gave a start at the hoarse, unnatural sound of his own voice, and as it set the white horse to plunging again, his bewildered wits cleared up as by magic.

He knew there was no hope for the poor creature, since its legs must be wholly buried in the sands by now, yet he cautiously lowered his own feet, feeling of the bottom, now well within his reach. He determined that there should be no mistake on his part, for what had flashed into his mind seemed little less than murder.

"Steady, poor fellow!" he muttered, gently stroking that dripping neck, shivering a bit him-

self as the doomed creature gave a whimper as of supplication.

He quieted the animal, then again noted how far up the water extended. Three more inches had been lost!

That meant death for the horse, at least, and his hand closed upon a pistol-butt. The water was already touching the muzzle, but with fixed ammunition, that mattered nothing. He knew the cartridge would respond to the touch; he knew that his own lease of life would be prolonged by the death of his trembling support; yet—he held his hand.

"Steady, old boy," he murmured, huskily. "It's like bloody murder, and I can't do it unless—Steady, boy!"

As long as he could keep the poor creature quiet, he would wait, for it *did* look like murder! Only for that support, he himself must die, drowning like a blind puppy!

Yet he knew now that each vain struggle only hastened the end, by agitating those slippery particles, and sinking the poor horse deeper.

For a few minutes longer his soothing voice and caressing hand kept the horse quiet, but each minute saw them sinking lower, saw the chilling waters creep up and up, until the horse showed only its head and neck above the surface, while Bantam Bob himself was forced to curl his legs up on the croup of his mount. Then—

With a wild, terrified scream, the horse began another struggle, only ceasing as a smothered explosion came.

Its head sunk almost beneath the surface, and the silently-flowing water caught an ugly tinge of color.

His face pale and almost ghastly, Bantam Bob gave another shiver as he lifted his smoking weapon, casting a slow, keen gaze around.

The sun had set, and twilight was creeping over the river, as over the land. That land! So near, yet so inaccessible!

If he had only been like other boys! If he had only learned to swim! Just a few strokes—so very few were needed!

The stream was narrower than usual at this point, and though the Bantam was nearly in the middle of the river, neither bank was more than twenty yards away. Only a pitiful score yards, yet they might as well be ten thousand!

"I couldn't make it—just couldn't!" he mumbled, shrinking in terror from the idea which just then flashed across his mind.

Might it not be possible for him, with a solid purchase for his feet against the now dead horse, to plunge across that pitiful space? Would he sink and drown, before he could gain land thus?

"I couldn't—just couldn't! I'd sink before—Ugh!"

He thrust his right arm up at full length, then emptied his pistol, forcing himself to give a regulated pause between the shots. Even now his brain was clear enough to measure the difference in value between a rapid, irregular volley, and a deliberate series, which might be read as an appeal for assistance.

Provided any friendly ears were within range, that was!

"Anybody—the sheriff, for that matter!"

It had come to that, already! The person whom he had been so eager to evade, only a few short minutes before, now would have been received with cries of joy and thanksgiving.

That thought struck Bantam Bob, among many others, and the ghost of a smile flitted across his blanched face. His sense of humor was unusually strong, and had he been at his last extremity, anything like a grim jest must have had its effect, accordingly.

Only for an instant, however. Then, clearing his throat and graduating his notes so as to make them carry as far as possible, Bantam Bob sent forth a prolonged appeal for help.

Presently he ceased, both to hearken for any answer, and to renew his breath. No reply came, and his blood seemed to chill in his veins as reason told him that no mortal being could be within a mile of his death-trap, at the lowest calculation.

"But they'll come—they *must* come! I'll die, else! Die—like a blind puppy, or a kitten, or a—They've got to come, I tell you!"

With a strong effort the imperiled man shut off his words. He was growing far too excited. And if ever he felt the need of a clear head and a cool brain, that need was right now.

"Be a man, you fool!" he muttered, over and over again. "Go crazy now, and you're a gone sucker. Sucker? That's a fish. Don't I wish I was a sucker? With fins! And a tail—a dozen tails, for that matter! I used to despise a sucker: all bones, and the rest a muddy flavor! Now—wish I was a mud-cat! Wish I was a muskrat! Wish I was—Why didn't I learn how to paddle, as a kid?"

Always back to that point, no matter whither he forced his brain to wander, trying to keep it steady through whimsical notions.

If he could only swim a few, pitiful strokes! So few would be sufficient, too! And he had wasted so many hours, merely paddling in a mud-hole, while a child!

The water was up past his middle, now, and in a few minutes more those devilish particles of

sand would be creeping up over the back of his dead support. Would those long white legs never strike solid bottom? Did the quicksand reach clear down to the center of the earth?

Once more Bantam Bob raised his voice, shouting until his throat felt sore and his lungs tender.

Still no response, after those prolonged echoes died away!

Surely some one must be abroad that evening. Everybody was not gathered at the Spectacle Ranch to witness—

"Even Bull-dog John is going!" groaned the entrapped man, yet fighting bravely against that benumbing sense of utter despair. "Here I'm wasting precious time, while he's picking up feet in a hurry! And Boss Payne ignorant of his peril! Curse my own self for an idiot! Why didn't I remember that a short-cut is almost always the longest way to get there? Why didn't I learn to swim when—Steady, Robert!"

He forced his mind away from that haunting regret, though with increasing difficulty. He forced himself to think help was coming to him in his dire need, slowly it might be, yet surely coming.

He forced himself to think of the Spectacle Ranch, its owner, its fair heiress, its gathering crowd. And prominent among them surely was Julius Payne, owner of the Pea-vine.

"And the sheriff—with his warrant—for what? Who swore it out? What charge does it bring? Surely not—Who'd accuse Payne of such a thing! Not any of the gang? Even they couldn't be so reckless, a body'd think!"

"And every minute's carrying Kenmuir nearer his game! And I'm stuck here, trapped, caught beyond escape! Here, when I'd ought to be whispering a warning in his ear, this very instant! He'll bag him—run him out of the country, leaving me to—what? Hold the bag, while others drive the snipe!"

The Beauty from Butte forced a laugh at that fancy, but it sounded hollow and so unnatural as to fairly frighten himself. And to stir his chilling blood anew, he fired another series of shots from his second revolver, deliberately counting twenty after each shot, before discharging the next.

He listened while slowly counting one hundred, but nothing like an answer came to his painfully-strained ears. Had no person caught the sounds of that signal? Was the prairie so utterly deserted as that?

It must be so, and yet—maybe firing would frighten, where a human voice lifted in despair might attract.

He shouted aloud, prolonging each note, sending it as far and as clearly as possible.

In vain! Never an answer came back, and each passing minute was the more certainly dooming him to death!

The body of the horse sunk more slowly than when only its slender legs had to separate those soapy particles, yet even now the sands were crawling over croupe, and rendering his perch on the saddle insecure. A few minutes more, and he would be forced to abandon even that poor refuge, or else feel the death-trap closing upon his own limbs.

Despite his forced composure, a groan broke from Bob's lips as he felt obliged to face this ugly dilemma. To remain much longer upon the carcass meant death, but to abandon it meant drowning!

"I'd give a big round dollar if I could feel sure I was born to be hung!" the poor fellow forced himself to utter, still fighting back grim despair with whimsical fancies. "I'd give two dollars if I hadn't been born hydrophobically! What a blame' fool I was to practice being a gamecock, when I might just as well have put in my odd time learning the duck trade! Duck? Goose, you idiot!"

After all, there was scant relief to be gained from this ghastly jesting, and knowing that the crisis could not be delayed much longer, Bantam Bob fell to counting his chances, or, rather, his lack of chances.

"To stick here until the sand gets its grip fast, means drowning, unless I blow open the place where my brains ought to be!" he mused, mechanically ejecting the empty cases from a revolver, then refilling the cylinder with cartridges taken from the belt about his waist. "I'd rather die *that* way, I do reckon! But—I'd a mighty sight rather keep right on living!"

He shouted aloud once more, but with the same lack of success. He had almost abandoned hope of receiving an answer, by this time, yet a man will cling to life with desperate tenacity, even after all earthly hope has fled.

He repeatedly measured the distance between himself and the two shores. He had long since known that a lasso of regulation length would cover the distance from either bank, but none such had hung to the saddle when he confiscated it, and he had never felt the lack until forever too late.

"If I only had—Ha!"

Surely that was the sound of a shod hoof striking against a rock? Surely help was coming?

He shouted, he yelled, he screeched. He begged and almost prayed for assistance, but

when he smothered his voice to hearken, not a sound came back by way of answer to his frantic appeals.

Surely he had been mistaken, and yet—it was the clink of iron upon stone! Was Sheriff Keonmuir and his posse out yonder in the deepening gloom, silently mocking at his extremity?

The thought was almost maddening, but it served to calm that overwrought brain in a certain degree, and Bantam Bob was on the point of plunging toward shore in his last hope, when a voice called forth:

"What in thunder 're you tryin' to do thar, stranger?"

CHAPTER VII.

OLD NATE, AND HIS GAL, POLLY.

THE Bantam was already facing in that direction, for the sound which caught his strained hearing came from the side of the stream near the point where he had forced the white gelding to take water.

He caught sight of a human head and shoulders rising above the coarse grass and weeds growing along the sloping bank, outlined against the sky beyond.

Up to that moment he had been half wild with mingled hope and fear, but a strange recklessness fell upon him as that voice came, and almost involuntarily he called back:

"Irrigating my corn-field, of course, stranger!"

"Don't keer fer no help, nurr nothin', I don't reckon?" drawlingly asked the man ashore; and before Bantam Bob could make reply, a clear, musical voice came from a little beyond, asking:

"What's gone wrong, pap?"

"Nothin' wuss then a dug-gun fool playin' tricks 'long o' himself, out thar in the drink, Polly, 'pears like. Ef I'd knowed it in time—"

He made a movement as though to beat a disgusted retreat, but Bob hastily checked him with an appeal:

"For love o' heaven, man, don't leave me to drown!"

"Ef? I thought you said—"

"The devil said it, not me, sir! Here I've been yelping for help so long that my throat's—You'll not let me drown, surely?"

Now that rescue seemed almost assured, the trapped man seemed inclined to grow irritable, yet a remnant of prudence choked back the angry words which tried to rise in his throat as he saw the stranger make no move toward lending him aid.

There were two of them now, for he caught sight of another figure only a little way back of the first comer, doubtless the "Polly" to whom answer had just been given.

Her horse it had been, probably, whose shod hoofs had given him his first ray of hope, for that the second figure was mounted, its attitude plainly betokened, though as yet Bantam Bob was unable to distinguish aught of the animal.

In fact he hardly tried to make it out, for that receding movement on the part of "pap," had brought back all his dread of a watery death.

"Don't leave—help me, man! I wouldn't leave a mangy cur to die this way! Help me, if you're anything like a man!"

"Ef? Hain't gittin' too much irrigated, be ye stranger?" drawlingly asked the unknown, his head abruptly sinking, just as though its owner was taking a seat for greater comfort in talking.

"I didn't—I was just joking," humbly said the little fellow. "Don't get mad, dear sir, but help me ashore, and I'll not only beg your pardon, but pay you—"

"How came you yonder?" asked a clear, musical voice.

"Went to swim across, and my horse got stuck in the quicksand."

"Waal, why in time don't ye swim back ag'in then?"

"Because I don't know how."

"Don't know—jest belly-buster on top o' the water, then kick back like a frog, an' paddle for'ard like a dog, an' hold up yer nose so the drink don't—Try it, oncet!"

"But don't I tell you I can't swim, you old—my dear sir! I'd sink like a hunk o' lead if I was to try it."

"Not ef ye keep yer nose an' mouth shet. Cain't sink a holler gourd, nurr a punkin, nurr a—what is't, Polly?"

"Are you really in need of assistance, sir?" his companion called forth, clearly.

"Never was unlucky wretchen more sorely in need of it, ma'am," came the quick yet lugubrious reply. "Wet to the neck, half-frozen, strained from crown to sole with trying to keep the current from floating me off the roost, yet afraid to touch the bottom with even a toe! Need of help? Lord love you, ma'am! Reckon I've been howling here after it for a solid week, just for fun?"

"An' me a 'lowin' 'twas a lost pig ketched under a gate!"

"Touch lightlv, pap! Are you fast in the quick, stranger?"

"Not yet, but I'm likely to be, unless—"

"Patience, then, and we'll have you out of that in a jiffy. Pap!"

"Right yar, Polly!"

"Your rope's the longest. Go fetch it, quick!"

"Waal, mebbe them corns hain't done soakin' yit, but ef you say I'd better, why I do reckon I'll hev to go fetch," drawled the man, rearing his long, gaunt figure, then slouching out of sight.

Those were trying moments for the entrapped man, and all the more so because he dared not give vent to his almost fierce impatience at those too leisurely movements.

What if these strangers should take offense, and actually depart, leaving him to his fate? How could he meet death, now, after hope had revived?

And those hideous particles were closing about his toes, his knees, as he knelt upon the now covered saddle. What if those people were merely playing with him? What if they had already doomed him to death?

"You're not—you will help me, lady?" he cried, huskily, as a sudden dimness in his eyes caused even that phantom-like figure to fade away from sight. "Don't go—don't let me drown, I beg of you!"

"Lively, pap! He's coming, stranger, never fear," came the reassuring words, and once more that whimsical habit assailed poor Robert.

"So's Christmas, but—where'll I be when it gets here?"

"Augh! bit him with a chunk, Polly!"

"We're doing our little best, stranger, and sneers on your part are hardly in good taste. Can you see to catch a rope, think?"

"Wait until I can wipe the tears of shame from my eyes—yes, I could see to catch a cobweb, if nothing better offered! I'm ready, if you are, ma'am!"

Polly rode a little nearer the edge of the water, and dim though the light had become, Bantam Bob could make out a slender form, but it not only wore a masculine garb, but rode in masculine fashion, despite the feminine voice and pet name.

A quick whirl, a cast, and with a stifled yell of grim delight, Bantam Bob caught the lessening noose with both hands, hanging to it with a grip which death alone could have broken before his will said yes.

"Can you hang on while I pull you to land, stranger?" asked Polly, a moment later. "Or, would you rather do the pulling? You can't sink as long as you keep in motion, and—"

"You'll think me a cur, ma'am, but—I'm afraid to try it! I'd go through fire, ten times as far, and laugh while doing it. But water—ugh!"

"Can you hang fast while I pull you, then?"

"Unless the strain cuts me in two, bet your sweet life!" cried the excited fellow, slipping the noose over his head and drawing it snug around his chest, below both arms. "I'm ready, ma'am! Now—g—it!"

Half wild at the prospect of escaping from the death he so dreaded, the Bantam flung himself flat upon the water, without waiting for the signal, and then began floundering and splashing crazily!

"Yank the blame' fool eendways, Polly! Ef he hain't a-drownin' of him own self, I'm a liar from 'way up the crick!"

A touch of the spur sent the horse away from the shore, and Bantam Bob was rapidly dragged to land, where Nathan Hucks was at hand to keep him from suffering still worse injury.

His signal instantly halted the horse ridden by Polly, and in less than another minute, the Beauty from Butte was standing on his own feet, on dry land, giving thanks with greater volubility than coherence.

Something which he said, or his manner of saying it, drew a laugh from his rescuer, and an abrupt change came over Robert.

His tongue seemed to grow thick, and he shrunk back, mumbling:

"I didn't think—if I'd known 'twas a lady who—"

"Augh, shet!" bluntly interjected the gaunt old fellow. "Lady be dug-gun! This is my gal, Polly. Jest Polly Hucks. An' I'm Ole Nate Hucks. An' you're—Who're you, anyway, stranger?"

"I'd have drowned rather than make such a holy show of myself, Miss Hucks," declared the little man from Butte, strong emotion in his voice as he bowed before that tall, queenly figure.

For such was Polly Hucks, despite her homely name, her unseemly garb. Queenly, in that her height was greater than the average of her sex. Queenly, in that her figure was simply perfection in all its curves and outlines. Queenly, in that, despite her surroundings, an air of proud *hauteur* accompanied her slightest movement, her passing glance.

And yet, surely never was a lady more cordially sympathetic than Polly Hucks, when Bantam Bob, as a partial excuse for his recent display, told something of his sufferings out there in the midst of death.

But, it could hardly be said that his explanation, for Nathan Hucks gave a grunt of dissatisfaction, then bluntly asked:

"Ef you've tired o' chawin' wind in rags, stranger, mebbe ye'll tell a critter jest how come ye so, fer blamed ef I kin make head or tail out o' it, so fur—no I jest cain't, now!"

Bantam Bob gave a perceptible start, then, as

through grateful impuls, he grasped the old man's hand, but gave it something more than the customary shake.

"Ef? you don't—Waal, I'll be dug-gun, all over!" spluttered Old Nate, yet cool enough to both return that peculiar grip and add another of equal import. "I say, you Polly!"

"Careful!" hastily hissed the man from Butte. "Remember the law which bars all outsiders, man!"

"Oh, shucks! Polly hain't no man, I reckon, but she's a mighty sight better'n the common run o' men-critters. So—he's one o' us, gall!"

If the young woman was surprised, nothing in word or action betrayed as much. She leaned over in the saddle and silently reached out a slender, yet strong hand, which Bantam Bob clasped closely.

"He is one of us, pap," affirmed the woman, rising erect in the saddle as the Beauty passed her silent catechism. "And you, brother, now that all fears are banished, might as well tell the truth about this little mishap of yours, even if it isn't quite as thrilling as the account you've just given."

"I've not lied, Miss Hucks," a little stiffly bowed the Bantam, at this unkind insinuation. "I've only kept back part of the truth."

"Waal, I reckon I'd ought to know ye, pardner, but—dog my cats all over the range, ef I kin place ye, now!" declared Old Nate, peering curiously into that odd visage. "An' yit, 'tain't more'n once in a while that a critter meets up with a mug like yours, nuther!"

"Never mind, pap," a little sharply interposed Polly. "From up, or down, brother?"

"Up. The head-center gave me orders, and they brought me into this section. I had those orders to carry out, but beyond that, I was left foot-free, to follow my own wits."

"All the way from yender, eh?" grunted the old man, with a trace of disgust in his tones. "Couldn't the big boss find a fitten man down neader home, I'm wonderin'?"

Bob hesitated a moment, then in lowered but earnest tones he spoke again:

"It isn't right, and if it ever leaks out I'll have to pay the penalty. I know all that, better than any other man can tell me. Still, you saved my life. Only for your coming, I must have died like a blind puppy! So—your name is Nathan Hucks, I believe?"

"I reckon 'tis, stranger, but why you're so—Ef?"

"I bated to say it, so soon, but there's been ugly hints sent to the Head-center about you, Mr. Hucks."

"About—Git out!"

"They lied!" sharply cried Polly, with a swift gesture. "A better, truer brother than Nathan Hucks never came into the family."

"I can readily believe that, sister," bowed Bantam Bob, his tones filled with a kindly gravity. "Still, I'm simply telling you the blunt facts of the case. Such hints have been sent in, and I was particularly enjoined to sift the matter to the bottom, among other duties."

"Who dared—We're more than ready to meet all such lying hints, if they can only be put into fair charges. Now—who and what are you, my pretty sir?"

"One of the family, as I've proved to you by word and grip. I'm in sore need of assistance, just now; will you give it?"

"What sort o' help is it ye want, stranger?"

CHAPTER VIII.

OLD NATE GROWS ENIGMATICAL.

"CAN you let me have a horse, long enough to carry me to the Spectacle Ranch?" bluntly asked the Beauty from Butte.

Father and daughter interchanged swift glances, but Polly was the one to speak first.

"We have but a nag each, sir, and can't well spare either of them. Are you in such great haste to get to Dexter Marshall's place?"

"Yes, in great haste. Will you give me a lift behind one of you, then, that far?"

"That sounds more reasonable," admitted Polly Hucks. "May I ask why you are in such a rush, sir?"

Again the Beauty from Butte hesitated, and again it was but for a space long enough to be noticed.

"To warn a friend that the sheriff is after him, with an armed posse—no less."

"What! A sheriff—and that friend?"

"Is Julius Payne, of the Pea-vine Ranch." Both father and daughter gave a perceptible start, and there seemed more than ordinary emotion in the quick glances which they interchanged at mention of that name.

"Then you know—you're aware that he is—" hesitated the young woman, a curious quaver in her voice.

"Well, not to say exactly know," said Bantam Bob, as Polly broke off without completing her question. "I can give a guess, though, else why is Bull-dog John Kenmuir so hot on his trail? Why is he after Payne with a warrant, and an armed posse to back him up in serving it?"

"Talk a-plenty, an' too much!" harshly interrupted Old Nate at that moment. "Ef ye want a lift, an' ax it as one o' the gang, we're

bound fer to give it, fur's we kin. My critter 'll tote double, I reckon. You hain't much bigger'n a pint o' cider, nur I don't reckon ye'll weigh sech a turrible sight more, nuther!"

He strode away to where his nag had been left while its master investigated that unusual alarm, and swinging his gaunt self into the saddle, he came back, to add:

"Gi' me yer paw, pardner, an' thar's my huff. Now—hitch an' a jump-up! Se!"

Bantam Bob was deftly swung to the croupe back of the saddle, and turning his horse's head up-stream, Old Nate started off in a rough trot which was hardly favorable to further speech.

In silence Polly bore them company, and even in his strong anxiety, Bantam Bob could not avoid remarking her grace in the saddle, although both position and garb were foreign to her real sex.

A few moments carried them to more favorable ground, and then Old Nate twisted partly around in his seat, to explain:

"You see, boss, we was jest happenin' 'long this way, chance so, an' was pritty nigh the ford when we ketched a turrible yelpin', like, down yender. An' so—waal, you know the rest, I reckon."

"I do know, and I wish I could even begin to express my heartfelt gratitude to you both," said Robert, in unsteady tones. "Not that I'm all coward. I'd hate to have you think me that, Miss Hucks, but I've a constitutional horror of death by drowning. My father met his death that way, only a short time before I was born—well, I can't help it, and that is all about it!"

"Let it pass, then, sir," coldly said the young woman, as they turned toward the ford: a shallow stretch of water, less than half a mile above the point where Bantam Bob had so nearly come to grief.

Old Nate chuckled softly as he felt how tightly the little fellow clasped his middle while the horses leisurely splashed their way over the ford, but as they once more struck dry land, Robert quickly rallied.

"Only for drinking and washing, I could wish every drop of water might dry up before sunrise!" he declared, with doleful earnestness. "If I only knew of a land where water didn't run, or where there was never a lake or pond, I'd emigrate there—too mighty quick!"

"We'll cross no more to-night, sir," coldly said Polly, then adding: "Are you quite sure you didn't forget something while explaining how you chanced to get stuck in the quicksand, sir?"

"Maybe I *did* leave out an item or two," half-sheepishly replied the Beauty. "But I didn't know you were of the family, then, of course."

"You know it now? Yes. Well?"

Under different circumstances a man of his mettle might easily have taken offense at that cold, crisp tone, but Bantam Bob could not so soon forget that he owed his life to these people, and with unusual meekness for him, he amended his narrative in some minor respects.

Both Polly and her father listened to his recital with close attention, but as though her curiosity was fully satisfied by his statement, the young woman fell to the rear, leaving Old Nate to do the talking for their side.

Even his tongue seemed less ready than usual, and with a faint air of uneasiness, Bantam Bob asked:

"Didn't I do right, Brother Hucks? Isn't Payne one of us?"

The reply came, but in curiously slow speech.

"Ax him, ef you're dead set on findin' that out. Ef you're what the word an' grip goes to show, then you'd ought to be up in the rules an' regulations. An' one o' them says, no namin' of names."

"But, among brothers?"

"Law is law, an' I'm ag'inst breakin' of it in letter or spirit. But thar's one thing I'm gwine to tell ye, an' that right plain: *hands off!*"

"What do you mean by that, man?"

"I mean jest what I say: *hands off!*" doggedly repeated Old Nate.

"Off of what, or whom? Confound it, man, can't you explain?"

"Law is law, an' I cain't talk much plainer than this. I say, keep your finger out o' the pie. I say, I knowed the sheriff was after Pea-vine Payne. I knowed it plenty soon to kick up a muss ef so be the notion hed tuck me, as it 'pears to hev tuck you. I knowed the pie was waitin' fer the sheriff, soon's he got ready fer it; but I never stuck my finger into it, did I?"

"But—you surely don't mean—what in thunder and guns do you mean, Nathan Hucks?"

"Waal, I'm better posted in this yer' mix then you 'pear to be, with all the 'thority you toted down this way on the back o' ye, yit I'm pritty shore I don't know the hull of it. What I do know, the law is flat ag'inst my tellin' ye, but—I say it ag'in, an' I say it *hard*: you jest lay back an' keep your fingers out o' this pie! Jest lay back an' keep a-waitin', ontel them as hev the right, comes to tell ye mix in! You've ketched on, stranger?"

"I hear what you say, of course, but if I understand what you mean, hope I may burst with curiosity!" blurted forth the puzzled Beauty.

"I'd like to tell ye more, but the law's dead

ag'inst my doin' of it, pardner. An' so I say: jest wait, an' keep on waitin', ef you don't keer to burn your ten fingers—an' burn 'em mighty bad, too!"

"You've said enough, pap," coldly interjected Polly Hucks, riding alongside the doubly-laden horse. "And you, brother, take warning in the same friendly spirit with which it is given."

"Of course, I know you mean well, friends, but—do you mean that I'm not to warn Julius Payne, provided I can get to him ahead of the sheriff and his posse?"

Polly leaned forward to grasp the reins of the other horse, bringing both animals to an abrupt halt, at the same time saying:

"No more, father. And you, sir, alight, please."

"But I don't—"

"You see yon' star?" lifting a hand to point her words. "Steer straight for that, and you can't miss finding Marshall's place."

Slowly, reluctantly, the man from Butte slipped to the ground, completely puzzled by this unlooked for change of programme. If there had not been a lady in the case, he might have spoken and acted far differently; but that lady had saved him from a hideous death, only a few minutes before, to say nothing of her belonging to the oath-bound association with which he had claimed affiliation.

Before he could put in shape even one of the questions which were crowding through his half-bewildered brain, Nathan Hucks quickly said:

"Ef ye don't play the fool so hard this night that ye cain't, boss, come to me at my place—anybody kin tell ye whar the Old Station is—to-morrer. I'm axin' it, by word an' grip, ye mind now?"

"And come fully prepared to satisfy us you have the authority you laid claim to, back yonder!" sharply added Polly, then sending her horse ahead at a swift gallop.

Old Nate bore her company, without giving the Bantam time to ask even a single question, and until they disappeared from view—that did not call for long time or great distance, since night had fairly fallen—he stood staring amazedly after them.

"Well!"

Only a single word, but it expressed a whole volume. Doubt, disgust, wonder, alarm, even: for surely a threat was hidden in those parting words from Polly Hucks?

What could it all mean? What ugly truth lurked back of Old Nate's ridiculous scruples? Why was he afraid to speak out more clearly?

"And why did he warn me against trying further to warn Julius Payne of peril? Surely he can't suspect—does he?"

The more Bantam Bob tried to solve that riddle, the greater grew his perplexity. The Huckses, father and daughter, were surely members of the gang of stock-lifters locally known as the Steer Buccaneers: they had responded correctly to both word and grip, known alone to the lawless family. And Payne—wasn't he a prominent member of the same organization?

"If not, why is Kenmuir out here with a warrant for his arrest? If he is, why does Old Hucks warn me hands off? Isn't it his sworn duty to warn a fellow-member of impending peril? Isn't it my duty—Well, if not, I'll make it my duty!"

Casting aside his puzzling doubts, Bantam Bob singled out the star indicated by Polly Hucks, then started forward at a rapid yet easy running pace that carried him quickly over the ground.

As he maintained that nimble stride, his fingers were not idle. He made sure his pistols were in working order, then refilled each chamber with a cartridge, giving a short, grim laugh as he thrust both weapons back into their spring-top scabbards:

"May be out of place at a wedding-party, but, when a fellow *does* want his guns, he wants 'em mighty bad, out here!"

For a full mile he ran at regular speed, then slowed up a bit, to catch his second wind. Not that he was tired; he had run just such races before, and knew the wisest course to follow.

Hardly familiar with the country, thanks to his recent arrival, he had no certain means of knowing just how far he was from the Spectacle Ranch, and while the night was perfectly clear, the moon had not yet risen in sight, and he could only dimly make out the landmarks.

Still, he believed he was not very far from his destination now, and feeling fresher than at the start, now his second wind had come to him, the Bantam sprang forward at increased speed.

Nimble as his legs moved, his brain was even more active. He had an abundance of food for thought, too: so much, that he could hardly be blamed for wishing it was less.

Considerably sooner than he had dared hope for, Bob caught his first glimpse of the Spectacle Ranch, and gave a quick cry of joy as he made out those twinkling lights ahead.

"Am I in time? Has Kenmuir got there, already?" were among the questions he asked himself while dashing at renewed speed down the barely perceptible slope. "I don't believe it, for—surely there'd be some sort of row kicked up before he could take Payne away?"

There was still a considerable distance to cover, and Bantam Bob was forced to make

quite a *detour* to avoid an ugly gully which cut across his present course.

This forced him around toward one side of the ranch-house, and partly cut off his view of what might just then be transpiring directly in front of the building.

Still he felt that, thanks to his mischievous doings at the Pea-vine Ranch, he had out-footed Kenmuir and his posse, since everything appeared quiet and peaceful at the house ahead. But as he rounded the gully, and once more gained a position from whence he could win a fair view of the front, he stopped short, with a fierce oath of disappointment.

CHAPTER IX.

A COWBOY JUDAS.

Few mortals have been more thoroughly surprised than was Billy Jacks when horse and rider dashed out and away from the stable toward which he was leading the sheriff and his posse.

At the first glimpse he recognized the white gelding, one of his employer's favorite saddlenags, and almost the same glance told him who that odd figure was, clinging to rein and saddle with the comical tenacity of a veritable monkey.

A curse and a yell chased each other through his lips, and jerking forth a revolver he opened fire upon that fleeing shape.

"Stop him! Don't let him git—white hoss Snow-squall! Quile him over ef— Oh, holy smoke!"

Probably because fierce rage dimmed his eye and unsteadied his hand, or it might be through an unconscious dread of injuring a horse so highly valued that a year of his wages would hardly suffice to pay for life or broken limb; for one or another reason, Billy Jacks wasted his lead, and emptied his first gun without touching hide or hair of that audacious horse-thief.

All the time he was cursing and howling, jumping about much after the fashion of the proverbial pea on a hot griddle. He was too greatly excited to take note of inaction on the part of his companions, until a dull click told him his first round was spent in vain. Then, as he swiftly changed pistols, he fairly howled at the sheriff:

"Shoot, durn ye! Fan him—fan him! Let a cussed hoss-thief— Oh, dog my sister's cat's kittens up a gooseberry tree!"

"Shell I, boss?" asked Martin Weaver, his black eyes glittering vividly as those of an angry snake. "I kin drop 'em both afore they run 'nother rod, ef you jest give the wink!"

John Kenmuir hesitated for a single second. He had recognized Bantam Bob in this bold horse-thief, and felt precious little love for the little knave who had led them so far from their game; but above all else he was an officer of the law, and as Weaver drew back the hammer of his magazine rifle, anticipating permission to open fire, he flung out a hasty hand, then said, sternly:

"Hold, men! Not a shot, for your lives!"

That was enough for his immediate followers, but Billy Jacks paid no heed, if his ears caught the words. He was wasting another round of cartridges with as fierce zeal as though his own life hung in the balance, for he saw that Bantam Bob was making for cover, now only a few rods ahead.

Once with that clump of trees between, and he could laugh to scorn all bullets, unless—

"Fan him! Fan him out, durn ye!" he cried, hoarsely, almost beside himself with rage and baffled fury.

Sheriff Kenmuir took a step nearer the cowboy, his left hand closing on an arm by way of emphasizing his stern speech:

"Simmer down, my man. You've played fool long enough. Now—come down to business, or I'll ask the reason why!"

"But—he played ye dirt! He's runnin' off a hoss wuth— Why didn't ye fan him out while ye hed a show?"

"Because I'd rather have him living than dead," retorted Kenmuir, giving the cowboy a shove toward the stable-door. "The horses, lads! We'll give the little devil a chase for it, just for luck!"

Then it became the sheriff's turn for cursing, when something of the mischief wrought by the Beauty from Butte was sighted; the severed bridles, with missing bits, for one thing.

A swift, hot explosion, then it was over, so far as mere sound and fury went. His darkly-flushed face turned almost pale, and drawing back a bit, John Kenmuir bade his men take careful stock of all damage done.

They put in a few choice oaths while doing this, and Billy Jacks fairly turned his tongue loose, proving himself an adept at blasphemy, if nothing to boast of in the way of a snap-shot.

Rather oddly, considering how industriously Billy Jacks had attempted to "fan out" the author of all this mischief, and how intensely he appeared to share their indignation at the wrong inflicted upon officers of the law who were simply attempting to do their duty as such, this very fuss and fury caused ugly suspicions to waken in the mind of the sheriff, and presently

the cowboy caught a cold, stern stare which blanched his cheeks and sent a nervous chill running along his backbone.

"How much of all this did you do, before the boys held you up, my pretty lad?" asked Kenmuir, one strong hand mechanically toying with a pistol-butt.

"I never— Holy smoke, boss!" gasped the cowboy, shrinking away.

"I hope you can prove it—for your own sake. You're dead sure you're not playing caboots with yon' runty rascal, to delay us, or to cheat me out of taking Julius Payne?"

"Me! I'd rather help ye ketch him than to eat when I's starvin', boss!" vehemently declared Billy Jacks, squarely meeting that searching gaze, and thereby partially clearing himself of ugly doubts.

Before this Kenmuir had summed the fellow up with tolerable care, and he felt fairly confident that Billy Jacks was not shrewd enough to pull the wool over his eyes, now that they were fairly opened.

Just then Jim Dustin came forward, to report: bits gone, bridles ruined, and cinches not much better.

"Nary a saddle but what'd take a turn-over ef we was to mount in a hurry, sir," he summed up. "I reckon the pesky runt thought you'd be fer givin' him a chase, an' so—"

"Can you fit us out?" sharply demanded Kenmuir of the cowboy.

"Ef you'll let me go 'long to see ye ketch 'em both—runt an' boss—yes!"

"Business, then, for too much time has been wasted already."

Billy Jacks was good as his word, for the Pea-vine was admirably supplied with everything essential to ranch life. Possibly the equipments were hardly as "good for looks" as those meddled with by the Beauty from Butte, but they certainly were as serviceable.

While the horses were being prepared for the road, Sheriff Kenmuir stood in apparent idleness, but in reality he was doing more work with his brain and wits than the other four men were doing with hands and feet.

Naturally enough he held a hot grudge against Bob for all the trouble that little rascal had occasioned, as well as for the evil he almost surely was still striving to execute; but, reason told him there was more than an empty love of mischief underlying those actions.

Condensed, his brain-workings amounted to just this: the Bantam was only a tool, seeking to save his master from arrest. Having led the posse astray, he crippled their means of pursuit as far as time and opportunity would permit, then hurried away to warn that master to flight.

"All's ready, boss!" finally reported one of his posse.

"An' thar's a chaine o' ketchin' the runty scrub, too, ef he happens to contrary Snow-squall 'nough to git his mad up," eagerly said the cowboy, in his own saddle by that time. "I kin pick up his trail an' lead ye at a run, 'most!"

"You say Julius Payne is sure to be at the Spectacle Ranch?"

"Why wouldn't he, when he's gwine to hitch up with the Marshall gal this very evenin'?"

John Kenmuir frowned darkly, then spoke with even more sternness.

"Guide us there, by the best and quickest route you know of. Never mind the little devil; his turn'll come later, I reckon."

"You don't reckon he's gone to warn Payne, sir?" ventured Harris.

"Warning won't save, if he has. Which way, my man?"

"Waal, thar's the reg'lar trail, an' then thar's the short cut, which lays so-fashion," with a sweep of a hand toward the point where Bantam Bob had crossed the swell. "That's the nighest, but this 'he's the best hoofin', an' as your critters 'pear kinder knocked up, why—"

"Take the easiest road, then, and waste no more wind," sternly interrupted the sheriff.

Billy Jacks obeyed, and for some little time no further speech was indulged in. The sheriff was in anything but an angelic humor, and none of his men cared to risk awakening his anger, while the cowboy was far from feeling wholly at ease.

Kenmuir was the first one to break the silence.

"I reckon you can talk and ride, both, my man. What is this little rascal to your boss? No actual relation, of course?"

"Not to my knowin', sir," was the prompt reply. "The dug-gun runty squab jest dropped down yer' a few days back; 'tanyrate, I never see'd nur heard tell o' him afore last week."

"Has he been stopping at the Pea-vine?"

"Not much! I kin stan' pritty much any sort o' truck, but that'd be too mighty tough a swaller! An' the boss—cuss him!"

"Steady, boy!" coldly interjected the sheriff.

"Why curse him?"

"Bec'ase he's done me more'n 'nough to deserve cussin'," viciously growled Jack, his black eyes glittering fiercely as they boldly met that keen, suspicious gaze. "I'll tell ye how he's used me, an'—"

"Never mind your private affairs, sir. I've no interest in them, further than to take ad-

vantage of your dislike—. You do dislike Julius Payne, then?"

"More'n that; I hate him! An', leavin' out private affairs as you say, sir, he's no good! Ef I hain't 'way off the range, he's head an' front o' all this cussed stock-rustlin' that's bin gwine on fer the year past!"

"You can prove this, of course!"

Billy Jacks hesitated for a bit, but frankly met that steady scrutiny while making reply:

"Waal, not to say jest prove, boss, but I'd bet odds I'm right in thinkin' that way. Ever since the boss cussed me up hill an' down fer payin' out a bull-headed broncho fer playin me dirt, I've kep' both eyes an' years open. I've ketched Payne more'n once in nasty doin's that'd fetch him to a rope's eend, ef 'twas told them as lost most by the gang they call the Steer Buccaneers."

"Yet you've held your hush, hating your boss as you admit?"

"Why wouldn't I?" with a sullen growl underlying his words. "I'm jest a cow-puncher, an' all the prop'ety I own, I tote under my hat. He's rich; he's tony; he's a slick talker; he's made fri'nds with all the ranchers in the State; he's gwine to marry the gal of 'nother 'way up rancher. Hain't all that reason 'nough fer my buttonin' my lip tight?"

Sheriff Kenmuir nodded assent. Through all this he had been keeping close watch upon the cowboy, and now he felt fully satisfied that Billy Jacks really hated his employer: that he was more than ready to betray Julius Payne into the hands of his enemies.

His doubts on that point set at rest, and feeling that he had no good cause to suspect another delaying trick, Kenmuir felt little or no curiosity concerning the precise matter which gave birth to this fierce hatred.

If Billy Jacks would serve him as guide to the Spectacle Ranch, where he now felt assured his game was harboring, after that service was rendered, he might go hang!

Their horses were pressed as hardly as was prudent, considering the distance they had to cover, and as the party rode along, Kenmuir put a few more questions to the cowboy.

He naturally enough felt a strong interest in Bantam Bob, but his questions brought forth little light. Jacks only knew him as a gasconading imp—"bag o' gas" as he put it—who had come from no one seemed to know just where, and whose business in that section was none the less a mystery.

"But ef I was to give a keen guess, boss," added the cowboy, "I'd say Snow-squall hain't the fust critter he's lifted! Ef he hain't one o' the rustlin' outfit, then I'll eat my ole hat!"

Still, as he could offer no actual proofs to that effect, Kenmuir let that assertion pass for what it was worth.

On one other point, however, Billy Jacks was better posted: the wooing and winning by Julius Payne of Edith Marshall, sole child and heiress to rich Dexter Marshall, owner of the Spectacle Ranch.

"An' that's why I hain't weepin' tears o' grief over the loss o' time that runty scrub made ye, boss," chuckled the malignant cowboy. "That's why I hain't so sorry we'll be a'ter dark gittin' thar. Fer, mind ye, the boss is dead gone on the gal, an' it'll cut mighty deep to be yanked off, jest as he's done got hitched up—see?"

CHAPTER X.

A BRIDEGROOM IN IRONS.

"BUTTON your lip, or I'll swell it shut with my fist!" sternly growled the sheriff, an angry flush coming into his dark face. "I'd give a finger to have got there in time to— Shut up, I say!"

Billy Jack grinned after a sickly fashion, but there was an evil flash in his black eyes as they lowered from that indignant face.

After that, few words were spoken by any of the party until the bright lights of the Spectacle Ranch were sighted.

Billy Jacks pointed them out, from his position in advance, as guide, then said:

"Course I'll keep to hand, case I'm needed, boss, but—waa, thar's a wheen o' the Pea-vine boys down yender, an' ef they was to see me cuttin' a splurge in the job, I reckon my neck'd take a mighty onhealthy start—up a tree!"

"I hardly think you've dared play me dirt, fellow, but—"

"It's on the dead level, boss!"

"But if you have, I'll play even," coldly finished the sheriff. "I can find you, if I have to, never fear. Fall out, if you like."

"I'm gwine right thar, boss, fer I wouldn't miss seein' the circus fer all Pea-vine, with the Spectacle throwed in! Only—I'd rather skirmish on my own hook, like, ye see?"

Kenmuir paid no further attention to the traitor cowboy, but gave his men their instructions.

These were simple, and easily comprehended. They were to follow his lead, and stand ready to fight for their prisoner, in case of an attempted escape or rescue.

"I'll give you words or signs, never fear," was his conclusion.

Without paying any further attention to Billy Jacks, the sheriff led his posse toward the ranch-

house, alighting and leaving their animals while a few rods away, for it was no part of their plans to arouse premature curiosity, and they could see that quite a number of men were scattered around the grounds in front of the building.

A bright light came through windows and the open door, and Kenmuir gave a low growl as he caught a glimpse of the interior.

"It's an ugly job, but the law sends us, and we've got to do it!" he muttered to his men, loosening the pistols in their scabbards as he strode rapidly forward.

Close at his heels followed his men, their faces a bit paler than ordinary, perhaps, but showing no sign of irresolution. John Kenmuir had picked them with care, and he had no fear as to the quality of his backing, that night.

The sheriff paid no attention to the whispered comments which came from the men through whom he passed, but when his foot touched the stone step in front of the open door, he paused, almost recoiled.

A goodly company was gathered within that large apartment, but of them all, Kenmuir saw but three: a white-haired, white-bearded man who stood with open Bible in hand, and the young couple who stood proudly yet half-abashed before him.

It was a wedding ceremony, beyond a doubt, and in that tall, neatly-garbed bridegroom, the sheriff recognized the man to arrest whom he had ridden so hard and so far!

As he had said, 'twas an ugly job, yet it might have been worse. The ceremony had only begun: the minister was giving the young couple a few kindly words of advice before speaking the all-important words.

If the arrest must be made at all, surely 'twas better made now, than after that beautiful girl was bound for life to a criminal!

So, at least, John Kenmuir reasoned, and springing quickly into the room, he approached the groom, speaking sharply:

"Wait a bit, if you please, good people!"

A cry of amazement broke forth, and Julius Payne whirled half-around, a hot flush leaping into his comely countenance, his right hand dropping that of the bride elect, to lift in a threatening fist as he demanded:

"What do you mean? Who and what are you, sir?"

"A mighty sorry man, sir, but a sworn officer of the law, for all that," quickly replied Kenmuir, taking advantage of the general confusion to spring forward, a strong hand catching the groom's arm just in time to check the blow which was aimed at his face by that hard fist. "Hold off, all of you! I'm sheriff, and these men are my sworn deputies!"

Edith Marshall had turned ghastly pale at that strange interruption, but now that she saw an armed stranger struggling with her lover, a cry broke from her lips, and she would have sprung to his assistance, only for a strong arm brushing her back as Jim Dustin jumped in to catch Payne by the other arm.

Fearing a rescue by force, Kenmuir called his great strength into play, swinging his prisoner around and back by that arm, then leaving his deputies to secure their game, while he stood in front, pistols out and ready cocked as he sternly cried in warning:

"Stand back, and take it coolly, gentlemen all! I don't want to use force if I can avoid it, but—my warrant says dead or alive!"

Edith gave a gasping scream at those terrible words, and with a sob of mingled pity, grief and indignation, Mrs. Marshall pressed forward to her bewildered child's assistance.

So quickly and adroitly was the deed done, that almost before he could realize what threatened him, Julius Payne was held helpless by three muscular hands, his guards each drawing a revolver with which to maintain their rights, if closely pressed.

A tall, broad-shouldered man, but little past middle age, started forward to confront the sheriff, paying no heed to the weapons which quickly barred his passage, hoarsely demanding:

"By what right— Who're you, to make a break like this?"

"My name's John Kenmuir, and I'm the sheriff of Blank county, sir," gravely answered the officer. "I've got a warrant here for the arrest of Julius Payne, and—"

"A warrant—for my arrest?" gasped the bridegroom, in real or admirably counterfeited amazement.

"Is your name Julius Payne, owner of the Pea-vine Ranch?"

"Yes, but—a warrant? You lie!" with a sudden outburst of fierce rage and chagrin. "I've done nothing to call for— Hands off, you scoundrels!"

The young ranch-owner tried to break away from his guards, but they held him fast, and stepping back, Kenmuir deftly snapped a pair of handcuffs upon his man, before any one else could even start to interfere.

"Sorry, but he would have it so!" sharply spoke the officer, once more on guard with his guns. "Keep back, all of you, I warn you as a friend. I'm sworn to take him alive if I can, but to take him, living or dead!"

The touch of iron upon his wrists seemed to take all the fight out of Payne, at least for the time being, and only for those strong hands which now lent him support in place of actual restraint, it seemed as though he might have sunk in a nerveless heap upon the floor.

Edith gave a wailing cry, and then buried her blanched, terrified face in the bosom of her weeping mother, whose loving arms closely unfolded the stricken girl.

The witnesses seemed stunned by this strange reverse, and though a sound of angrily excited voices came from without doors, no interference came from that quarter as yet.

Dexter Marshall turned paler at those significant words, but his iron will proved equal to the task, and holding his emotions in stern subjection, he reached out an open hand, saying:

"You're a sheriff, you say?"

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry, but—"

"And you've got a warrant for—for him?"

"I have. May I ask your name, sir?"

"Never mind my name. 'Twas my girl he was to marry, if you— Peace!" he cried, with sudden anger in his tones as he turned to shake clinched hands toward the excited spectators. "Stand back, one and all of you! I'm master in my own house, yet, and I say—peace, until I can get at the root of this nasty affair!"

"I thank you, sir," said Kenmuir, quickly, putting up his pistols and drawing a folded document from an inner pocket. "I only pulled guns to keep a row from starting, I assure you."

Nevertheless his deputies retained their pistols ready for use in case an outbreak should come; no unlikely thing, judging from the angry cries and heated words which came to their ears from the men outside the building.

Dexter Marshall, having checked those of his friends within, took the paper, unfolding it and swiftly taking in the contents, so far as the material facts were concerned.

As he did so, he gave a violent start, his face flushing almost purple, then blanching just as quickly.

"Murder! My God! he's charged with willful murder!"

At that terrible announcement, Edith gave a wild scream, then sunk a limp and lifeless weight upon her mother's arms, almost bearing the poor woman to the floor in her sorely agitated condition. She gave a cry for help, but it was hardly heard, just then.

Julius Payne seemed to regain all his physical powers as that terrible word was pronounced, and he saw its effect upon the poor girl whom he was to have called wife that night.

"Hands off, you devils!" he hoarsely cried, struggling desperately to break away from that united grip. "It's a lie—a lie, false as hell itself! I never— Edith, my love, my wife! It's a lie, I tell you, darling! I never— Let me go, you hellhounds! She's— God! you've murdered her!"

"Back, one and all!" thundered Dexter Marshall, facing the open door through which armed men were beginning to crowd at that wild appeal. "Back, I say! If innocent, I'll set him free; if guilty—I'll help hang him with my own hands!"

"And I say keep back, gentlemen, all!" added John Kenmuir, never more thoroughly deserving the sobriquet of "Bull-dog" than in that critical moment as he faced the angry men, guns ready for use. "This is my man. He stands charged with willful murder, and the law has told me to arrest him. I've done that. The law bade me bring him to the bar, to stand trial. I'll do that, alive if you'll let me, but—I'll take him there a corpse if I can't do any better!"

A curious calm fell over the excited gathering at these coldly resolute words.

Julius Payne shrunk back, as though awed. Edith had fainted, and was now being cared for by friendly neighbors. Dexter Marshall spoke once again, his tones harsh yet calm, though that composure was plainly forced.

He bade his agitated wife remove their child, and watched her form until it was borne from the room. Then he turned upon Sheriff Kenmuir.

"May I have a word or two with your prisoner, sir?"

"In my presence, of course," bowed that official.

"Look up, Julius Payne," added the ranch-owner, in tones even more harsh than those he had used toward Kenmuir. "You've made love to my girl, and turned her head until she wouldn't listen to reason, though it came from the lips of her own parents. Now—how is it? You've played us dirt, or this man lies, and his warrant lies! You've covered my name with shame and disgrace— No, that's a lie!" and his huge form was drawn proudly erect.

"I never— Tell Edith— Let me go to her, you hounds!"

"Stop!" and the father gripped the struggling prisoner by the shoulder with almost savage force. "You've tried to blast my home, as you will blast the life of my only child unless— Prove yourself innocent of this foul charge, Julius Payne, or I'll crush the life out of you with my naked hands!"

"Steady, Mr. Marshall!" quickly interposed the sheriff, seeing that further grace might

prove dangerous to his prisoner, if not to himself and posse. "Let me say a word, while you try to cool off a bit."

"Isn't it enough to make a man hot?" hoarsely panted the rancher. "To think that— Make him confess, then!"

"I've nothing to confess, for I'm innocent— innocent as Edith, her own pure self!" passionately cried the handcuffed bridegroom.

"You are Julius Payne, aren't you?" coldly asked the sheriff.

"Yes, but—I never committed murder! It's all a devilish plot to ruin me for life! I'll never submit to it—never, with life!"

CHAPTER XI.

TURNED OUT OF DOORS.

SEEMINGLY beside himself, Julius Payne began fighting for freedom, and powerful though the deputies were, it actually looked as though one or more of them would be forced to bring both hands into play, to prevent losing their man altogether.

This they were loth to do, for ugly words and even threats came from the outside, and none could say how soon it would come to a question of quick shooting and hard fighting.

"Off, ye hounds!" pantingly cried the accused, writhing and twisting in a desperate attempt to free his arms from those gripping fingers. "I'm not—never living, curse ye all!"

"He'll have a fair show if you'll let him, friends!" cried Sheriff Kenmuir, loudly, still hoping to effect his capture without coming to actual blows. "I'm sent to take him, and— Stand back, Marshall!"

He flung out a hand to check the big rancher in his advance, but it was swept down and aside by a single sweep of that mighty arm. Dexter Marshall did not give him a glance in passing, but reached out to clap a hand on the bridegroom's shoulder, giving Payne a slight shake as he sternly spoke:

"Simmer down, young man! Can't you see that you're making matters all the worse? Quiet, I say!"

There might have been magic in that strong grip, for Julius Payne at once gave over his furious struggles, shivering like a leaf as he met this stern gaze.

His eyes, large, deep brown in color, had ever been one of his facial charms, but now they showed bloodshot, and seemed to have sunken deeper in their sockets. Strong emotion had wrought as great a change in his handsome face as desperate struggling had in his wedding garb.

He met that stern gaze, half-bewilderedly, shivering anew as he recognized strong suspicion in those glowing gray orbs.

"You—surely you can't—before high heaven, Marshall, I'm not a murderer!" he panted, his tones so hoarse as to be almost inarticulate. "It's all a lie! All a foul trick to ruin me in— Could I love Edith as—"

"Bite it off right there, Julius Payne," coldly yet fiercely interposed the father, his other hand swinging forward, to brush across those blanched and trembling lips. "Not her name, unless— Can you prove your innocence, man?"

"Is this a time or place—" began Kenmuir, only to be cut short by a fierce gesture.

"Quiet, you! It's time and place of your own choosing, and now—I'm trying to get at the truth, man! Better help than hinder—or even try to hinder!"

There was a menace underlying those words, and bold, self-reliant officer though he surely was, John Kenmuir saw fit to accept that warning in good part.

He had both seen and heard enough to convince him that he could only take his game away through rare good fortune. If this man stood his friend, or even neutral, his chances would improve; but if Dexter Marshall should turn flatly against him, only a miracle could hinder his losing prisoner and life as well.

"If that's all you ask, so be it," he said, clearly more for the benefit of the spectators than the rancher himself. "I never denied man or brute a fair shake, but best cut it short, Mr. Marshall."

"You'll not—I can't stand it to be treated— It's all a foul lie, hatched up to ruin me!"

"Don't be a fool, boy," sternly spoke the ranch-owner, his strong grip tightening, his arm giving the accused an impatient shake. "If you are innocent as you say, no harm can come to you."

"But—Edith—"

"Stop!" and that pale face flushed red in the lamplight, something like a spasm distorting his features. "Not that name, or I'll— Don't tempt me too far, man! She's my child—the only one above ground this bitter black night! All gone but her, and she—"

Strong emotion choked his voice, and as though suffocating, he flung back his grand head, sending the mane of reddish-gray hair flying.

John Kenmuir started to speak, but a fiercely impatient gesture warned him not to interfere so soon, and he fell back a pace, keeping watch and ward over that little group.

Julius Payne seemed strongly affected by that emotion, and in far from clear tones he uttered: "I know, I understand, father; but Edith will—"

"Will you take warning, I say? She's my child, pure as a snowdrop, and you have no right to even pronounce her name while this foul accusation hangs over your head."

He spoke with forced evenness, and Julius Payne seemed to catch something of that false composure, for his agitation vanished, and from nervous shivering, he stood erect and strong, his words coming clearly.

"I swear that I've done no wrong thing, Mr. Marshall, least of all ever committed a crime deserving such a crushing blow as this arrest has been. Put me on oath—give me the Bible to kiss, and in her pure name I'll repeat—I'm innocent of any thing like murder!"

Clearly, distinctly, with a show of his former feverish excitement only showing in his last words, Julius Payne spoke thus, and John Kenmuir frowned uneasily as he saw something of the effect that declaration of innocence produced upon the disinterested witnesses.

Another such speech, and he might well have the battle all over again, with the odds still heavier against himself and his posse.

Yet he knew, too, that a single rash or hasty step on his part might easily precipitate the very conflict it was his duty to avoid, if possible, as a representative of the law.

"If you are guiltless, as you say, Mr. Payne," he began, only to be cut short by Dexter Marshall once more.

"Wait, sir! I'll not keep you much longer. And you, sir, hear me out. If you can prove your innocence in the face of all mankind, as well as the eye of the law, all right: I'll welcome you back, and all shall be as it was before this— this man crossed my threshold."

"This, I repeat, if you can clear your good name. If you can't do that, or until that name is fully cleared, the less I see of your face the better 'twill be for both of us."

Something in that hard-set face, those blazing eyes, even more than the words themselves, seemed to partially stun the accused, and his voice was but a husky murmur as he once more attempted to protest his innocence.

But Dexter Marshall seemed unwilling to hear him out, turning away to face Sheriff Kenmuir as his hand dropped from that shivering form.

"Now, sir, a word or two with you. Who are you?"

"I told you, once: the sheriff of Blank County."

"And your name is—"

"Kenmuir. I was christened John, but I've heard say other parties have given me an extra title: Bull-dog Kenmuir."

A grim smile came into his strong face as he spoke, and there was a glow of defiance in his dark eyes as they flashed over the gathering, out of which came more than one ugly mutter.

As an officer of the law, John Kenmuir could play patient with almost any man, but there was a limit, and he was coming perilously near to it, at last.

"I've heard the name, but that don't count," coldly returned Marshall, extending an empty hand. "You say you are an officer of the law, sent here to make a legal arrest?"

"I said just that, sir. Now—"

"Patience a bit, please. Will you show your authority, in peace?"

"By what right do you ask such—"

"Or must I search for it, on my own hook?" coolly finished the ranch-owner.

Something in his matter-of-fact manner touched a kindred chord in the sheriff's nature, and with a laugh he once more displayed his warrant, backing it up with his credentials as an officer.

"Not that I usually lug 'em around with me, you understand, sir," he said, grimly, as he flashed another warning glance around. "But I was told my mission might lead me into a pretty tough crowd, and so I came fully prepared— papers for the honest, pellets for rogues!"

Dexter Marshall paid no attention to that half-insolent speech. He was once more glancing over that warrant, this time looking for flaw or trace of fraud. In vain. He knew enough of such matters to feel satisfied everything was strictly legal, so far as matters had gone.

He saw, too, he was confronting a regularly elected sheriff, whose authority could not be resisted by any honest member of society. And having seen this much, he refolded the papers and handed them back to Kenmuir.

Through all this, Julius Payne had been watching the two men, his pale face plainly betraying how terrible was his suspense. And now he could no longer choke back the words:

"It's a lie, blacker than the devils who hatched it up, but—who am I accused of murdering?"

"Aaron Belasco, of Denver," curtly replied the sheriff.

"Aaron Belasco? I never knew a man by that name, so how could I kill him?"

"Then it ought to be so much the easier for you to prove your innocence," returned the officer, pocketing the papers, buttoning his

coat closely over them, then glancing into the stern-set face of the rancher whose home he had so rudely invaded.

"Are you satisfied, so far, Mr. Marshall?"

"So far, yes. You've got your man. Now—good-night!"

His left hand rose and pointed to the door, with a meaning which could not be mistaken, even if his closing words had not been distinct.

Sheriff Kenmuir gave a start of angry surprise, then hastily said:

"You can't mean just *that*, man! It's a dark night, our horses are jaded, we haven't taken bite or sup since early morning! Surely—"

"Excuse me, Sheriff Kenmuir," and Dexter Marshall bowed stiffly. "I ought to have asked you, first, have you papers to back you up in making a demand for food and shelter under this particular roof?"

"Don't be a fool, man!"

"Answer me, if you please: have you such authority, I ask?" persisted the ranch-owner, in painfully polite tones, but with a grim smile beginning to creep into his strong face.

"Of course I haven't, for such papers—"

"Then—*rack out o' this!* Yonder's the door, and it stands wide open. You came in without an invitation, but you go out *with* one: and if you're not anxious for help in going, you'll leave at once!"

"But, as a man who—"

"Man? You're not a man, but a bloodhound who fattens— Will you take the hint without a kick, Sheriff Kenmuir?"

A subdued cheer came from the men without, and ugly words began to make themselves heard: words which hinted at more than rudeness, words which were coupled with hints at long ropes and short shifts!

What might have cowed an ordinary man, only served to nerve this human bull-dog, and whipping forth a revolver with each hand, he took a step toward the open doorway, as though able to clear a passage for both himself and the posse guarding his prisoner.

"Steady, men!" cried Dexter Marshall, springing past the sheriff and lifting his empty hands as he added: "No violence, as ye are honest men! Let the law take its course, or you'll have me to down, first of all! No violence, I ask of you, as an honest man, like the rest of you!"

"Bring him along, boys," commanded Kenmuir, with a flashing glance that way. "Freeze to him living as long as you can, but kill him rather than let those howling curs tear him out of your grip!"

"Those curs, as you term them, sir, are honest men who—"

"Never mind explaining further, Mr. Marshall," bluntly interrupted the officer. "This is your house, as you've taken pains to let us know. As such, you have a right to choose your guests, of course."

"Will you leave this, sir?" demanded the ranch-owner.

"I'm going, with my men, and my man, yes," retorted Kenmuir. "I'm going, but I reckon it'll pay me to come back, when I have a bit more time to spare. I've got the game I came for, but, from all I've seen and heard, I reckon there are others in these parts it'd pay an officer of the law to look after."

"Is that meant for a threat, Sheriff Kenmuir?"

"Threat or warning, just as best suits you, of course."

"All right. There's the door: now—*get out of this!*"

CHAPTER XII.

BEARING A BOLD FRONT.

THROUGH all this, Julius Payne had stood submissive in the grasp of the deputies, seemingly completely cowed, or else broken in spirit by the harsh manner in which his protestations of freedom from such foul guilt had been received by the father of the girl whom he had fondly hoped would, long ere this moment, have become his wife.

Nor did he offer any resistance as the deputies, in obedience to the signal given them by their superior officers, forced him across the room toward the door. Apparently that heavy blow had crushed all manhood for the time being.

A sudden silence had fallen upon those without doors, after the swift appeal made by Dexter Marshall. Lacking a leader such as the big rancher would have made, the excited men stood irresolute, hardly knowing what sort of reception to give the sheriff, who paused as he gained the threshold, his armed hands in full view as he spoke in sharp, distinct tones:

"Gentlemen all! I'm not doing this through love, or because I take pleasure in breaking up a social gathering. I'm a sworn officer of the law. A warrant for the arrest of a man, charged with willful murder, has been placed in my hands. I've received orders to arrest that man, and I've done it."

"But he never done it, cuss ye!" came a hoarse voice from out the shadows hard by.

"That's not for you or me to decide, stranger,"

coolly retorted the sheriff. "I've arrested the man named in that warrant, and I'm going to take him away, since we're turned out from shelter. I'll take him living, if you'll permit, but—rather than lose my grip on him for even one second, I'll blow out his brains, even though my own takes wings at the same moment!"

A low, ugly muttering came from those men, and Kenmuir quickly added:

"That's not meant for a threat, gentlemen. I'm simply giving you to understand what my bounden duty is: *to hold, or to kill.* As white men, I ask you to let us go our way in peace. If not for our own sake, for that of our prisoner, and that of the young lady who—"

"No more, John Kenmuir!" harshly interposed Marshall. "Leave my family out of the question, but I'll say one more word in your favor."

Standing upon his own threshold, Dexter Marshall spoke that word, and said it well. He begged the gathering to make no further disturbance, but to permit the law to take its course.

"Even were you to attempt a rescue, what would it amount to? John Kenmuir swears he'll shoot Payne rather than see him set free, and—"

"Cain't others work a gun, as well?"

"Can, but will not, I'm sure," quickly replied the rancher. "Even if you could set Payne free, what better would that be? He is charged with willful murder, and until he can fairly prove his innocence, he's better in legal hands than at liberty. For his own good I'm appealing to you, neighbors and friends. If guiltless, he'll come forth a free man, unharmed in life and character. If guilty—let him pay the full penalty of an outraged law, say I!"

During this brief speech John Kenmuir had quietly drawn back, to drop a cautionary word into the ear of each of his deputies, giving them their cue for coming emergencies. Now that Dexter Marshall came to a pause, he stepped forward, with frank gratitude in face as in word.

"You're clean white, Mr. Marshall, and I thank you for proving it. If trouble comes, after all, be sure I'll never lay it up against you, even if you have driven us from your roof—"

"What I've done was for my friends and neighbors, sir, not through love for you or yours," harshly interrupted the rancher. "If I had my wishes, you'd break your neck with the first step your nag takes! Now—I've cleared the way: rack out, while my temper sleeps!"

Kenmuir flushed hotly at that rude rebuff, but he was still cool enough to realize that he could gain nothing by retorting, and might lose much.

Marshall's appeal seemingly had produced a good effect, but that might quickly wear off, and until he had the prisoner fairly in the saddle and on the road, he knew that their peril was great.

"Bring the prisoner along, men," he said, distinctly, himself stepping to the ground, holding his cocked revolvers ready for use in case that quiet should prove deceptive. "Pay no attention to outsiders, but see that you hold your man fast."

Not a word was spoken as the posse emerged with their charge. The captive walked with free steps, but he seemed dazed by this terrible blow, coming just as his dearest hopes were on the point of fruition.

Sheriff Kenmuir led the way, heading toward the spot where their horses had been left, showing a bold front to all.

Yet no man living could more fully appreciate the real peril which menaced. One word, carelessly spoken; one step, recklessly taken, might bring on a fight which could end only in the death of himself and his deputies.

He had no means of knowing into what sort of a snare he might be blindly leading that posse, for time enough had been spent for their animals to be removed, and a scheme of rescue planned out; but without the slightest show of doubt or fear, he led the way onward.

No voice was lifted to curse or revile, and no obstacles were put in their path. It really seemed as though Dexter Marshall had indeed cleared the way for their retreat!

Not until they were almost at the little clump of trees at which their animals had been left, did keen-eyed John Kenmuir catch sight of aught to arouse suspicion, but then, as he glimpsed a crouching figure, he flung up an armed hand, to sternly demand:

"Who are you? Steady, or I'll blow you through!"

"Don't—jest me, boss!" came a husky reply, which was instantly recognized as the voice of the cowboy Judas.

"Who's with you, man?"

"Nary soul, boss, jest Billy Jacks, waitin' fer to help ye off, now you've ketched—dug-gun him!"

Julius Payne appeared to recognize that voice, for he gave a start, much as one might who breaks through a stupor; but before he could do aught more dangerous, a broad palm covered his mustached lips, and a stern warning entered his ear:

"Quiet, man! Kick up a row, an' you'll be the fu'st one to croak!"

"Don't let him break away, pards!" hastily muttered Billy Jacks, then adding even more rapidly: "Critters ready, boss, an' I've ketched up 'nother fer him to straddle. Best climb up, an' git out o' this, fer ef the boys was to break—"

"Button your lip, and keep a lookout," sternly interrupted the sheriff, as he hastily unfastened the nearest horses.

Billy Jacks had spoken true when he said that he had provided a mount for his captive employer, and with an inward thanksgiving for so much, John Kenmuir caused his prisoner to be first lifted to the saddle; but before he could mount all of his party, there came a rush of feet, and a goodly number of men came into sight, from the direction of the house.

"Guard him, men!" cried Kenmuir, sternly, springing to the front with ready weapons.

"And you, gentlemen, better—"

"Steady, friends!" called forth Julius Payne himself, despite the menacing muzzles which tested his ribs on both sides. "Raise no row, I beg of you! It can only make matters worse for me!"

John Kenmuir was taken by surprise, for aid from this quarter was about the last thing in life he could have expected; but he adroitly improved the opening, by crying forth:

"That comes of his own free will, gentlemen! For his sake, don't try to crowd us too hard!"

"You can do me no good, but only harm, I assure you, friends," added the prisoner, with amazing calmness in one who had so recently seemed fully overcome by that dread shock. "Make 'em see that, Oliver," he said, recognizing the foreman of the Pea-vine, despite the gloom.

"We'll set you free, if you only drop a hint, boss!"

"But I say no!" with a touch of almost angry emphasis. "You heard what Mr. Marshall said: unless I could clear my name and honor, I was to never show my face where—in *his* house. There's only one way I can hope to do that, and if you lay a straw in the path of these men, I'll be the main sufferer."

"Well, if you say so, boss," reluctantly spoke the foreman.

"I do say it. But you can help me, if you will."

"How, boss?"

"Go hot-foot to my lawyers—you know who—and tell them just what has happened. They'll know what steps to take, and if any persons can clear away this devilish lie, they're the ones to do it!"

"Well, I'll do that, sir, and gladly. Of course you'll have some of the boys to keep you company, just to—"

"I've got to draw the line at that, gentlemen," quickly interposed the sheriff. "I'll treat Mr. Payne as white as he'll let me, but I can't run any such chances. We go alone, peacefully, I hope, but we go without an escort of honor!"

"He's right, Oliver," said Payne, though with a trace of regret in his tones. "He don't know the boys as well as I do, and his doubts are natural enough. Good-by, pard! Make all haste to do what I told you."

"Be sure I will, sir. But—I've fetched your own nag, if you'd rather have him under you than a strange brute."

"Thanks, if the sheriff will permit me to make the change."

Kenmuir raised no objection, though he was impatient to get under way, where the chances of a rescue would be lessened. Although no open violence was offered, as yet, ugly sneers and uglier threats were being flung toward them, despite the appeal made to his friends by Payne.

Covertly advising his deputies to endure those slings in silence, the sheriff transferred Julius Payne to his own saddle, then caused his men to mount, starting away over the comparative level, just as the first rays of the nearly full moon began to show themselves.

He rode close alongside his prisoner, a hand on Payne's nearest arm, his other fingers gripping a pistol-butt. And as they left that jeering group behind, he muttered to his captive:

"Try to hold 'em in check if they make a rush, Payne, for, sure as yonder moon's coming up, I'll blow out your brains rather than permit a rescue now!"

A shiver crept through the arm he was grasping, but no answer came.

Seemingly that one effort to save himself, in saving his captors, had exhausted the energy of the sorely-stricken man, for he rode limply, and as though all but the bare breath of life had left him.

For some little distance nothing occurred to awaken fears of interference with their charge; then Jim Dustin gave a low warning:

"Hoss-critter over yender, boss! Mebbe it's a trap to ketch us!"

But before they could fairly draw rein, a guarded call was heard through the night, and the familiar voice of Billy Jacks came to their ears:

"Nobody wuss then jest me, boss, glory to the good luck all 'round!"

The cowboy advanced as though assured of a hearty welcome, but as he met cold looks and colder welcome, he hastily offered his plea.

"I hed to skip, when the boys come, fer they wouldn't 'a' let me off that easy; but I kep' a eye out, an' now— They's nobody at the Pea-vine this night, but thar is grub an' shelter, ef you keer fer it."

That hint was more than welcome, and while far from certain that they could pass the rest of the night without disturbance, possibly by some of the Pea-vine cowboys straggling home, John Kenmuir knew that he would be fully as safe under that roof, as adrift on the prairie.

Then, too, a supply of food would come in good play, since they had fasted since early morning, as he had stated to Dexter Marshall.

Billy Jacks quickly followed up his advantage, offering to guide the party to the ranch by the short-cut, crossing the river at a ford which would lessen materially the number of miles they would otherwise have to travel.

With hardly a doubt or thought of treachery on the part of one who had shown so much eagerness to effect the disgrace of his employer, Kenmuir accepted that offer, and with a chuckle of grim pleasure as he cast a leering glance at the dejected captive, Billy Jacks led the way toward the river at a rapid pace.

He struck the river at the same ford over which Bantam Bob had been helped, and as their mounts paused near mid-stream to drink, Billy Jacks managed to be close alongside the sheriff. And then, without word or sound or warning, he knocked Kenmuir headlong from the saddle!

CHAPTER XIII.

MORE MISCHIEF BREWING.

WHEN Bantam Bob rounded the gully and again came to a point from whence he could catch a fair look at what might be going on immediately in front of the Spectacle Ranch, he saw John Kenmuir just on the point of entering that building for the purpose of arresting Julius Payne on a capital charge.

It was hard, to lose the race by such a narrow margin after such a gallant struggle, and that must be the little fellow's excuse for venting a vicious curse of angry chagrin as he shook clinched fist toward the officer who had, after all, beaten him in the race on which hung liberty, if not life.

"Jig's up, and you might as well own it, Robert," he muttered, advancing once more, but at a walk in place of running. "A long half-mile from here, and Bulldog Johnny isn't a man to cut time to waste when he once sights his game. It'd be all over before you could trot so far. Then—unless the boss kicks, in good earnest!"

As he must have known, there was more than a fair chance for just such a happening, and as he broke into a jog-trot, Bantam Bob took the precaution to feel of his weapons.

"Not that I'm going to wade in over my head," he reflected, too deeply interested in this affair to keep entirely aloof, even in mind. "I've done my level best to hinder a row, but, if one does come—if it's bound to, unless there's heap sight more angels on earth than I've been able to believe, up to date!"

The Beauty from Butte made fairly good time in covering the remaining distance, but the row which he so confidently anticipated did not break forth, although he could guess something was going on inside the building of more than ordinary interest, from the manner in which the cowboys gathered around the entrance.

Without attracting notice by so much as a glance, so far as he could tell, Bantam Bob joined that gathering, and gained a glimpse of the interior, his keen eyes taking note of all the more prominent actors in that little drama: of John Kenmuir and his posse, of Dexter Marshall, wife and daughter, of Julius Payne, stunned, bewildered, helpless in the firm grasp of the armed deputies.

While taking these notes, the little fellow's brain was working with unusual rapidity, yet for the life of him he could not fairly decide upon his proper course of action.

He knew that John Kenmuir would never loosen his game, now his grip had fairly closed upon it, without a hard and stubborn fight. The blow had fallen. Poor Edith Marshall had already tasted the bitterness of death, and no step which he might take could soften the shock to her.

He caught ugly growls and muttered oaths, coming from the excited men about him. He knew that all they lacked was a man to lead them. With such a head, they would crush both the sheriff and his posse, let them fight as wickedly as they might, but—

A bony set of fingers closed upon his arm, and a hiss that was almost snake-like, entered his ear.

Bantam Bob flashed a glance over his shoulder, to recognize the face of Nathan Hucks, from whose lips came the guarded words:

"Hands off, banty!"

That muscular band drew him back, and rather than attract what might prove unwelcome attention, Bantam Bob yielded to that

mute demand, saying nothing until they were fairly clear of the eager crowd.

"What you want, then?" he muttered, in anything but a pleased tone of voice. "If pay for my passage, I'm dead broke, and can't liquidate until I hear from my bankers, at Butte. So—"

"Oh, clap a stopper on!" grunted Old Nate, with a gesture of disgust. "Ef ye really can't git 'long 'thout talkin', why don't ye try to say somethin'?"

"Because I'm waiting for you to begin saying it, pap," promptly replied Robert, at the same time casting a keen glance around, in quest of another personage. "Where's the adorable Polly, as a starter?"

"Never you worry over Polly, dug-gun ye!" growlingly answered the veteran, by no means pleased at the question. "Polly kin take keer of her own self, but you— Caint ye 'member nothin', longer'n the nose on yer face?"

"Never you worry over my nose, dug-gun ye!" snapped the Bantam, both tone and manner being ludicrously like those so recently displayed by Old Nate. "As for the rest, if you mean—"

"I mean jest what I meant when I told ye the fuist time: hands off, or you'll ketch the wurst burnt fingers you ever owned! That hain't none o' your mix, in yender, an' ef you try to stick a finger in, mebbe you'll ruin the hull dug-gun business!"

"But, man alive!"

"Which I've kep' on bein' alive so long, pritty much through bein' my own 'tatur-rom, an' never bulgin' in whar I didn't b'long. An' ef you ever hope to turn them red ha's gray, the sooner—his'en!"

Bantam Bob was listening, far more to the mutterings which came from the outside witnesses than to the prosing of this, his recently formed acquaintance. But hard though he tried, he could not fully decide what proportion of that excited gathering was for, and what against the accused ranch owner.

Some were growlingly menacing the sheriff and his posse, but others were just as earnestly denouncing the man who had brought such bitter shame and grief to an innocent girl.

"All of a mux, an' ye cain't even begin fer to tell 't'other from which, don't ye reckon, banty?" chucklingly asked Old Nate, after a brief pause. "Pull tailor, pull tinker, an' the Old Boy squatin' on the fence-post, watchin'! Good Lawd! hain't hed so much fun sence—ketch on, stranger?"

"Catch nothin'! I can't make out head nor tail, with all my tryin'," muttered Bantam Bob in response, his tone full of perplexity and disgust. "If you can, give me a steer, Hucks."

"Which I done 'way back thar, when I bid ye lay low an' keep your fingers out o' the pud-din'. I say it all over, ef you want it, an' I say it hard: hold your hush, keep out o' the rush, an' don't run the resk o' ketchin' wuss to your own self by thinkin' you're playin' big in tryin' to save what don't call fer no savin'."

Bob gave a growl of impatience, for each sentence let fall by this old knave, obscured rather than cleared up the mystery.

Although beyond reach of the voices of those inside the house, he was near enough to both see and feel that passages of more than ordinary interest were transpiring in that room, yet strong as was his wish to witness all that might happen, he could not refrain from making one more effort to gain at least a grain of information.

"Isn't Payne one of us? And being such, aren't we bound by oath to lend him aid while in sore need of assistance?"

"Did them as sent ye down hyar, say he was one o' us?" asked Old Nate, in turn.

"Not in so many words, but—*isn't* he a member of the family?"

"Ax him, when ye git a chaine, pardner. Law is law, an' the one I'm keepin' fast afore the eyes o' me, says no names kin be named, outside o' the reg'lar council-chamber. An' so—ax him, ef ye must know."

Old Nate spoke with provoking deliberation, and thoroughly disgusted with his experience as a cross-questioner Bantam Bob turned away to resume a more favorable station for taking notes of the arrest and what might come of it.

"Don't you be in such a mighty rush, pardner," checking the Beauty by a quick grasp. "Let me say jest this afore ye go back: *Hands off!* Look all ye like, but don't mix in. Let the game work itself out, now it's fairly set to goin'."

"What is the game, then, confound you for a clam!"

"Never you mind, so long's I tell ye it's all right. Don't you go to upsottin' one o' the slick-est jobs that was ever put up on mortal critter!"

"Yes, but *which* critter?"

Old Nate shrugged his shoulders without further reply, and when the man from Butte pressed that question hardly, his manner changed to one far less agreeable, and he sternly muttered:

"I've told ye more now than the law 'lows, stranger, an' I've got jest this much more to say: this job is bein' jobbed under the word an' the gripl! Now mix in, ef ye reckon you kin 'ford it," and as though bound to avoid further questioning, Nathan Hucks turned abruptly away, slouching off through the gloom, leaving the

Bantam to digest that significant warning as best he might.

If not satisfied, the Beauty was silenced, and with an increase of caution, he stole nearer the building, to see and hear, yet keeping where he could easily evade being drawn into a row in case such should actually be the outcome of this bold arrest.

Everything bore that appearance, although Bob could see that those of the outsiders who openly expressed sympathy with Julius Payne, formed but a small proportion of the whole. They were the loudest, no doubt, but when it should come to acting—

"That's a boss of another color!" mentally decided Robert; and he waited the end with growing interest.

Yet it was fated that he should not witness that end, so far as taking Julius Payne from the Spectacle Ranch was concerned, for just as the situation appeared at its most critical stage, a bony set of fingers for the second time closed upon his arm, and Old Nate Hucks whispered a single word in his ear: the same word which had passed between them just after the rescue of the Beauty from the quicksand.

Bob hesitated, but only for a second. Under the circumstances he dared not refuse to obey that summons, and so stole away, close at the heels of the veteran.

"What now?" he ventured to ask, in guarded tones, when fairly clear of that interested gathering.

"By the word an' the gripl!" came the whispered response, "thar's work ahead, an' I reckon you'll ketch a mighty sight more fun with us, than by freezin' fast right hyar."

Less than a minute carried them to where a number of men were silently mounting, and as Old Nate climbed to his own saddle, he lowered a hand for the Bantam to grasp, saying:

"Climb up abind, Banty! You've done it afore, an' I reckon you kin do it ag'in ef ye try right piert!"

As their fingers met, Bob received that mystical grip, and once again he felt that he dare not hold back.

The next instant, securely perched behind Old Nate, he was riding at a gentle pace away from the Spectacle Ranch, in company with nearly a score of others, so far as he could make out.

Among them he fancied he recognized Polly Hucks, but if so, she took good care to keep far enough away to make a greeting out of the question, where caution seemed to be the order of the hour.

"What sort of work is it, brother?" he ventured to ask of Nathan, but that worthy seemed fully as enigmatical as ever.

"Give your eyes a chaine, pardner, an' mebbe you'll see—waal, you'll see what you do see; I reckon!"

Little information to be extracted from that speech, surely! And yet, a flood of light seemed to enter that puzzled brain, and only by locking his jaws could Bantam Bob hold back the startled ejaculation which rose in his throat.

How blind he had been, up to now! How simple was the explanation, now the right clew was given him!

Instead of resisting the sheriff and posse at the Spectacle Ranch, where a fight must almost certainly end in harming some of the helpless guests, a plot had been formed to rescue the ranch-owner while being taken away!

Not a word was let fall by any of the party during that ride, which grew swifter as the danger of being heard by those still at the ranch grew less, but long before they drew rein at the river ford, Bantam Bob felt assured his guess had been correct.

A single glance showed him how favorable that spot was for laying an ambush, for all was cast into shade by the bushy tops of the tall trees which grew on both sides of the stream. And as the party alighted to conceal their horses, he ventured to address Old Nate with:

"It's not butchering, brother? I was warned to check all that, when they sent me down here, for—"

"Don't you worry, banty! Look on ef you like, or rack out, ef that pleases ye better; but what's comin' you cain't hinder, one iota!"

CHAPTER XIV.

AN ADVOCATE FOR MERCY.

THE Bantam flushed hotly at that contemptuous tone, and retorted:

"If I can't hinder so mighty much, I can at least report!"

"Which is jest what I set out to say," added the old man. "Ef the looks o' things don't bit your notions, I reckon you kin find the trail which fetched ye down to these parts. Thar's nary critter in this bunch as'll kick or horn ef you feel like rackin' out right away. An' when you git back to them as you 'low sent ye hyar, jest up an' tell the Head-center how we-uns down hyar play tricks on them as flutter a red rag afore our eyes!"

So saying, Old Nate moved off, to play his part in the preliminary preparations, leaving Bob to digest those blunt sentences according to his wishes, or his ability.

Even now, there were precious few words uttered by any of the band. Each and every

member seemed to know his duty, and set about it after a purely business-like manner.

Only Bob seemed uneasy, or without an understood station, and he stood in irresolution until Polly Hucks came to drop a warning word.

"You needn't take part in this little deal, sir, if you don't care to," she spoke. "When I tell you 'tis all done under the word and the sign, of course you'll not do or say aught to disarrange our plans."

"Why was I fetched along, then?" he demanded.

"For reasons which appeared to us good and sufficient, sir. Possibly you were needed as a witness. Possibly 'twas to keep you from making us trouble at the ranch, through your lack of posting."

"I'm ready to be posted, though!"

"Time enough for that, sir, after you have answered a few questions to-morrow, at the Old Station. Now, take to cover, but unless you are really anxious to draw ugly suspicions your way, keep a silent tongue in your head, and don't attempt to skulk away!"

The plain speaking young lady left him, and unable to see what better he could do, the Beauty sought a comfortable bit of cover, doing a vast deal of thinking in the minutes which elapsed before the sound of hoof-strokes warned him that the critical moment was nigh at hand.

Unfortunately for himself, however, the Bantam had fancied the attack would be made just as the coming party was leaving the stream over which he had passed before Old Nate dumped him to earth, and he had chosen his hiding-place accordingly.

Hence it came about that he failed to win a fair view of that exciting scene, and only witnessed the ending of it.

Billy Jacks used his clubbed revolver with good judgment, and the very first stroke freed the rescuing party from their most dangerous adversary: knocked out of his saddle by that treacherous blow, John Kenmuir fell headlong into the shallow water, unable to fight or to advise.

Billy Jacks grasped the rein of Payne's horse, spurring swiftly onward, while nearly a score armed men rushed upon the bewildered posse, some grappling with them, others covering them with guns, fiercely calling for surrender, under penalty of instant death.

Although the result could hardly have been different, with the odds so heavily against them, yet with John Kenmuir able to fight at their head, the posse surely would have given their captors far more trouble.

For, captured they were, and that without a single grain of powder being burnt. Thrown into confusion by that unexpected treachery, and not yet fully understanding the sudden disappearance of their chief, the deputies yielded their liberty, rather than lose their lives.

It was all so quickly, so adroitly performed, that the prisoner was out of sight, the posse captured, Kenmuir picked out of the water by half a dozen men, before Bantam Bob could change his position for one from whence he might see as well as hear.

All was seeming confusion, and it was no easy matter for even his keen eyes to select friends from enemies; yet a carefully laid programme was being systematically carried out.

The captives were rushed through the ford and up the bank. Horses were mounted and urged away, not one of the company seeming to give a thought to the Beauty from Butte, just then.

"All the same, I'm bound to see it out!" that gentleman doggedly decided. Long and hard, though the race might be, he fully resolved to be in at the death.

Fortunately for his legs, however, that ride lasted but a few minutes. The party came to a halt in a little grove of trees which stood little more than a mile from the river-bank, and when the Bantam came pantingly up, he saw that he was yet in time to enter a plea of mercy.

He could see nothing of the rescued bridegroom as he hastily glanced around, but all was dim and indistinct under the trees, for the men who were gathering materials for a fire had not yet completed their arrangements.

His next thought was of the only two persons whom he could fairly claim an acquaintance with, but as he failed to catch sight of either Polly or her father, he accosted the man nearest him, with:

"Where's Old Hucks, for—"

A heavy hand dropped upon his shoulder, giving him a rough shake as a stern voice cut his question short:

"Name no names, you idiot!"

Half in anger, half in wonder, Bob stared at the speaker. It surely was the voice of Julius Payne, just as it was his size, his general appearance; but he wore a long overcoat which reached past his knees, his felt hat was slouched low over his face, and even that was hidden still more completely by a silk handkerchief knotted at the back of his head.

"I'm glad you're set free, sir, but—surely you'll not let these men be butchered?" quickly uttered the Bantam, choking down personal feelings in his growing anxiety for Sheriff

Kenmuir and his posse. "You hear what they're hinting at, Mr.—"

"Call no name, I tell you, fool!" still more harshly repeated the disguised man. "As for Bull-dog John and his pups, let them win free—if they know how!"

He turned away and disappeared behind a tree-trunk, and knowing from his tones that further appeal in that quarter would be worse than vain, Bantam Bob once more looked about for Old Nate, springing forward to join that worthy as he caught sight of his gaunt figure.

"You'll not—it'd be bloody murder, man!"

Hucks shrugged his shoulders in grim significance, but then said:

"Kin any one man bender the lot, ef so be they're dead sot on the job, stranger? Ef you reckon that way, why don't ye pitch in, your own lonesome self?"

Truly there seemed cause for alarm, to one who shrunk from border vengeance. From ugly hints and subdued mutterings, men were beginning to openly talk of hanging out of hand.

"What better'd they give the boss?" hoarsely cried forth a burly fellow, shaking over his head a coiled lariat which he had just brought over from where their horses had been hitched. "Sence they like hangin' so mighty much, what's the matter o' us givin' them a dose o' the same medicine?"

"Don't be a fool, boy!" muttered Old Nate, as Bantam Bob made a move to interfere. "They'll send you up a tree, jest as sudden!"

"I yach 'em, I say! Then thar'll be no com'n' back at us, to play even! Dead men cain't tell no tales!" roared the sanguinary member.

"These men can, though!" cried Bantam Bob, springing forward, pausing in front of the prisoners as they stood grouped, bound and helpless. "Take the fair warning I'm offering you, gentlemen! Don't make a bad matter mighty sight worse, or we'll have to pay the penalty!"

"Dead men cain't squeal, dug-gun ye, runt!"

"Give a puff, an' blow him clean out o' sight, Ben!"

"Ketch him under yer hat, then feed him to a squire!"

"Set him up on a chip, so common eyes kin ketch sight o' the weenty toad!"

"That's all right, gentlemen, and mighty amusing if you only think that way," coolly retorted the Beauty, better pleased at ridicule than he would have been under other circumstances. "I'm littler'n some of you, I'll admit, but maybe I know just as much about some things, and I'm open to bet I know a mighty sight more, about certain other matters."

"You say that dead men can tell no tales," with a mock polite bow toward the man with the rope. "I dare say you believe all that, but—"

"I knows it, so skin out o' this afore I spit, an' drown ye, dead!"

"You're a gentleman, Benjamin," bowed the Beauty, blandly. "And as one gentleman speaking to another, I ask you to hear me through. Then, if I haven't converted you wholly to my view of this matter, I'll tail on the rope with just as much will, if not quite so much muscle, as even you can display. Isn't that fair, now?"

"Bulldog Johnny's gwine to pull rope, so what's the use?"

"Then my talking won't lessen his weight enough to hurt, pardner. But, as I set out to say: these men, if killed to-night, surely will tell tales out of school, or else I don't know Governor Toole!"

"What's he got to do with it, dug-gun ye, critter?"

"Well, more or less, just according to what you gentlemen make up your minds to do here, this night. If you decide on hanging these four men—"

"Men be durned! They're blood-suckin' houn' dogs!"

"Bloodhounds be it, if you like the title better: by any other name they'd squeal just as loudly for vengeance on their destroyers, and when that appeal reached the ears of Governor Joseph Toole, as it most certainly would—"

"What's the odds? What kin he do, when it's all jobbed out?"

"If you knew him as well as I do—or once did—you wouldn't ask that question, pardner. I knew him long before he went to Congress, or turned up as governor of this, our noble State. I knew him when he was just Joe Toole, a school-boy, in St. Joseph, Missouri."

"What's that got to do with this job, I'd like to know?"

"Have patience, and maybe you'll begin to see before your stock of patience quite runs out," blandly answered the Bantam, who knew that there was rare virtue in speech, even though it was more sound than argument, in cases of this description.

The longer he could stave off positive action, the better would be his chances of carrying his point, for in cool blood, no man was ever lynched, to his death.

"I knew Joe as a boy. I went to the same school with him, and more than once I saved myself from a licking, by shifting the fight on his shoulders! I've seen him licked—but not

often. He was a spindling sort of fellow, when a boy: he hasn't filled out so mighty much since, for that matter, except at both ends!"

"I've seen him licked, but the more he was licked, the more he wouldn't stay that way! He'd come back for some more, as soon as he had eyes to see out of, and before he quit, satisfied, 't'other fellow had quit just a little bit sooner."

"And that's why I'm warning you against lynching these men. They are officers of the law, and serve under Governor Toole. They're his hands, so to speak, and when they turn up missing, Joe Toole will avenge their deaths, if it takes every dollar and every man in Montana to bring that vengeance about!"

"Oh, choke him off!" cried a disgusted voice from the outside of that little squad of lynchers.

"Who in blazes are you, anyway?"

"Do you ask that question for a gentlemanly answer, or simply as a scoff, dear sir?"

"For an answer, of course! Are you ashamed to tell?"

"Not if I know my mother's son, I'm not ashamed," and diminutive Bob drew his figure proudly erect, his big eyes beginning to glow. "My name is Robert Kimberly, better known, perhaps, as Bantam Bob, the Beauty from Butte. I'm little, but I'm mighty. I'm put up in a small package, perhaps, but so is dynamite. And if I can't make quite as much sound, I can do just as much damage, when I set my mind to it!"

"Sound enough and to spare, but whar's the sense?"

"I'm giving it to you in chunks, gentlemen," retorted the Beauty, speaking earnestly. "I'm pleading for your sakes, even more than for the lives of these four men. I'm begging you to think twice before you set a bloody mark upon each of your doors, and I'm begging hard!"

"At the same time, gentlemen, let me add this much: in place of begging, I might command you to let these men go free!"

CHAPTER XV.

LESS BLACK THAN PAINTED.

"TETCH lightly, critter!" sharply cried Old Nate, making his appearance once more, and shaking a bony hand by way of lending emphasis to that hasty warning. "Law is law, an' when you try to buck ag'inst sech as that, you want to— Stiddy, I'm tellin' ye, now!"

In the excitement of the moment, the Bantam had permitted his tongue to go just a little too far, as he realized even before that warning cry came from the veteran.

He had every reason to believe that the majority, if not the entire party, belonged to the lawless gang known as the Steer Buccaneers, but as yet he had not tested each man "by word and by grip," without which he was forbidden to even mention the wide-spread organization in which he claimed membership, and to which alone he could attribute his authority, just alluded to.

In his anxiety to prevent what he plainly deemed a bad, if not actually dangerous break, Old Nate forgot much of his habitual drawl, the words following each other with more than customary rapidity, yet his speech gave the Beauty from Butte time to rally, and devise a cover for that awkward slip.

"The very gentleman I was hoping would come to the front," he said, with an air of candor. "Possibly Mr. Hucks himself wouldn't feel inclined to boast of the fact, but he and I are fairly well acquainted with each other, and if he will select a few of you gentlemen as representative members of the opposition, I'll give them my authority for what I let drop but a bit ago."

For some reason the Beauty seemed to have hit a streak of luck where things went crooked, despite his efforts to the contrary. While trying his prettiest to smooth over one slip, he made another, and only began to realize as much when, with an angry gesture, that gaunt shape slipped out of sight.

"Name no names!"

Once again had he broken one of the laws which bound together the society on whose secret power he was depending, and in desperation he let that point drop, once more speaking to the main point, hoping even yet to save those silent, sullen prisoners from meeting death by the rope.

"Sober reason ought to be enough, among gentlemen such as have congregated here to-night," he said, his tones shriller than usual, in his heated state. "And sober reason warns us that if these men be lynched, those who sent them into these parts surely will investigate their disappearance, and when the cause is discovered—as it can't help but be, in the end—every power of the State will be brought into play to avenge their taking off."

"Do you say 'tain't right to deal out to 'em a dose o' the same medicine they was fixin' up fer Jule Payne?" demanded one of the party.

"I'm talking of policy, not right or wrong, gentlemen," quickly cried the advocate for mercy. "I'm saying that we can't afford to hang these fellows! If nothing worse, 't'would fetch a swarm of law-hounds to this section, and

—can we afford to have them here, all eyes open?"

At last Bantam Bob knew he had made a decided hit, for the fellow who had noosed *rtata* fell back, and heads drew together for hasty consultation.

Fearful lest he make matters worse instead of better, the little fellow resolved to break off at that point, and quietly drawing closer to where the sheriff and his posse were awaiting the verdict, he let fall a hurried whisper for John Kenmuir's benefit:

"I've done my little best, stranger, now try to back it up. Talk 'em soft, if they ask questions. Promise what they expect, and maybe you will pull out of the noose, even yet!"

"No skullduggery, thar!" came a suspicious call, and without waiting for the sheriff to give an answer, Bob moved on once more.

As he said, he had done all that lay in his power, outside of armed interference, and that was not to be thought of, let what might be the punishment measured out to these unfortunates.

No single man could hope to bluff off a score, and a show of guns would surely result in his being riddled with bullets.

Yet the Bantam was not wholly without hope, so far as the lives of the sheriff and his posse were concerned. Men who mean murder do not cut so many minutes to waste, and when a mob of lynchers grow cool-headed enough to listen to a plea for mercy, the crisis has fairly passed.

Some there were, of course, who still openly advocated hanging as the only fitting reward for such an invasion, but even they were less savage now, and more inclined to listen to argument.

All at once a move was made toward the prisoners and their immediate guards, and Bantam Bob, hanging on the skirts of that movement, ready to advance or beat a retreat as his own health advised, fairly held his breath in his eagerness to learn what fate awaited them.

The man in disguise of coat and handkerchief, whose touch had given the little man such a start not long before, was in the lead, and he it was who, in a hoarse, coarse voice, plainly altered for the occasion, uttered the first words:

"We've concluded you're hardly worth hanging, Bulldog John; but before we turn you loose, take warning: if ever you breathe a word of your experience this night, or if you ever call by name any person whom you may fancy you have recognized as forming one of this select tea-party, or you ever again venture within this range—woe be unto you! Say your prayers beforehand, for you'll not live long enough to say them, after crossing the boundary line!"

"That's our warning. This is our hint: hatch up a lie to account for your loss of prisoner, if you like, but don't tell the plain truth!"

The speaker paused, as though expecting a reply of some sort, but none such came. Knowing that, were he to unlock his lips, he must speak his real sentiments, Sheriff Kenmuir kept silent. And as their chief made no reply, neither one of his deputies felt it their duty to fill his place.

"Still the bull-dog, eh?" asked the leader, with a harsh, unpleasant laugh as he turned partly away. "All right: we're not pining for a song from your lungs, and having given you fair warning, we'll give you the rest! Lively, boys!"

At his signal, the four men were pounced upon by ready ruffians, and while his deputies were having their bodies bared to the waist without ceremony, Sheriff Kenmuir was first searched.

The masked leader took the papers which came from Kenmuir's bosom, and drawing back to the fire, opened and glanced over each, as though resolved to make sure of their importance. A short, fierce laugh followed, as he rent both warrant and requisition papers in half, then dropped them into the heart of the bonfire, watching them until they turned to feathery ashes.

"Now, serve him the same way, my gallant lads!" he cried, retracing his steps to witness the punishment. "Without his papers he's just plain Jack Kenmuir, and as such—"

"I'll play even with you, Julius Payne!" savagely growled the helpless sheriff, struggling desperately to break away from both bonds and captors.

"Gag the cur if he persists in barking, boys!" commanded their leader, without showing further resentment at being so singled out by the prisoner. "Hurry up with the rigging, you fellows!"

"All's ready, boss! Shall we slap 'er on now?"

"Yes. You came here in the disguise of white men, Jack Kenmuir, but we'll send you back home, in your real colors!"

Only too willing to perform his part, the fellow who held paint-pot and brush, slapped the latter across the face of the helpless sheriff, working with such hearty good will that in less than a minute his own mother would never have recognized her son.

From crown to waist he was daubed with black paint, only an occasional streak or patch of white skin being visible here and there.

The luckless victims resisted as far as able, but that only added to the brutal enjoyment of

their captors, and not until the last man was thoroughly daubed over, was the next move taken.

The same animals on which the men had been when captured, were brought closer to the fire, then each man was hoisted into a saddle, there to receive bonds which held them securely in place, strive how they might to free themselves or one another.

Their feet were connected by rope, passing under the belly of the horse, and other lengths bound them to horn and cantle. Their hands were already fastened behind their backs, and when the reins were slipped over their heads, thus giving them at least partial control of their mounts, their faces were turned toward home; and while the four horses were being fastened at close intervals along a lasso, taunts and jeers, epithets and foul names, mingled with threats of still ruder treatment awaiting their coming back, were poured upon the luckless men.

But little Bob Kimberly had not waited to witness the ending of all this, when once satisfied that the sheriff and his deputies would escape actual death.

For one thing, his suspicions were aroused by a treble fact: the tall fellow whom he was fairly certain was Julius Payne in disguise, as well as the Hucks, father and daughter, had disappeared, without word or warning, so far as the Beauty had caught.

"Off for fresh mischief?" he asked himself, uneasily, on making that discovery. "Who now? Wonder if— Lay low, if you have to crawl, old friend!"

Knowing that his breaking through the repeated warning they had one and all given him, must have irritated the trio, the Bantam began to suspect evil to himself, and taking advantage of the crowd being fully occupied with their victims, he crouched low, and stole silently away from the timber island.

As he gained the open ground, Bob cast a wary look around in quest of the trio whose unexplained absence was causing him such uneasiness. But he could catch no trace of them. Either they had taken the opposite direction, or else their departure had been much earlier than he, in his natural interest as to the fate of the posse, had at first suspected.

Hardly knowing just what course he ought to pursue, but feeling that he would be safer not to be seen by that brutal gang, just then, the Bantam hastened away from the spot, only pausing when at what even he deemed a safe distance for one on foot.

Crouching down in a depression, he kept keen watch on the island, and saw the sheriff and his deputies sent forth at a gallop, amidst laughs and jeers, threats and curses, to meet—what fate?

"Lord have pity on 'em if the critters stampede in good earnest!" muttered the Beauty, nervously twisting and squirming. "For little I'd— Why not, then?"

Acting on impulse, the little fellow left his hollow, crouching low down to lessen the risk of observation by the lynchers, running at top speed in a course which promised to, sooner or later, strike the trail of the helpless men.

Fortunately for him, perhaps, the lynchers left the scene of punishment in a direction which led toward the ford, while the sheriff and his men had been sent off in one almost directly opposite.

Thus freed from fear of being caught in his work of mercy, Bantam Bob pressed ahead at still greater speed, now that he need take thought only for those in advance.

"After all, his chances were more favorable than might have been expected, for while sent off at a gallop, the four horses, tied together, head by head, with just room to run or walk in line, or abreast, could not well exert themselves, and by leaning heavily back, thus bearing on the bits through the reins about their necks, it was not long before Kenmuir and his companions in misfortune managed to bring their animals down to a walk.

The Bantam knew nothing of all this, however, and settled himself down for a long and exhausting chase. No matter how bitter might be his dislike for the law-hounds, he felt that he could not permit them to go wandering about thus, perhaps to perish in their helplessness.

Long before he dared hope for such good luck, Bob caught sight of his game, and pressing forward at top speed until near enough for his words to be readily understood, he called forth:

"Flag o' truce, pardners! Wait a bit, an' I'll do ye as good a turn as you'll let me!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE BANTAM DOES HIS DUTY.

WHEN that friendly call came to their ears, the paint-bedaubed and hampered men were trying their level best to either slip or break their bonds, knowing that if one should succeed in freeing his hands, the rest would be easy enough.

John Kenmuir had bidden them do their best, and he had set them the good example; but even he felt that success was well-nigh impossible, so thoroughly had the lynchers done their work.

At that hail, a momentary confusion took possession of the luckless party, for their first thought was of the lynchers, who had repented their leniency, and were hurrying after to complete their dastardly work.

Naturally enough their next thought was of seeking safety in renewed flight, but it was no easy task to start the four fretting animals in unison, and before that could be done, keen-eyed John Kenmuir saw that only a single man was in sight upon the moonlit plain.

"Don't run!" cried Bantam Bob, divining their first impression by instinct. "I come as a friend, and if I don't set you all free, 'twill be because you'll not let me do the job!"

To make sure his object should not be thwarted by a break-away, the Beauty caught the nearest horse by the bits.

"I'm trying to play you white, Mr. Kenmuir, although you may not find it easy to think that way."

"You were one of those devils, back yonder!" harshly growled the sheriff. "Play white? You?"

"Even I, dear man," bowed the Beauty, seeming more like his usual self than he had at any time since running away from those very men.

"Surely you must have heard my melodious bazoo, lifted for peace, back yonder? Surely you'll not deny that, only for me, you'd one and all of you be oak-tree fruit this holy second?"

"Better than like this!" bitterly muttered the officer, plainly betraying how deeply he felt his ignominious situation.

"That's what you say, but it isn't what you mean, pardner," added the little man from Butte, in soothing tones. "I know it must seem mighty tough for a gentleman of your caliber to be turned into a black injun, rigged out for the war-path, but—"

"I'll play even for it! I'll wipe off the score if it takes me all the rest of my life!"

"Ef you raally 'low to set us free, stranger, now's the time, fore them pizen imps takes it all back, an' comes to begin it all over ag'in," urged Jim Dustin, in a more conciliatory tone of voice.

"I'll set you free—on certain conditions," came the response. "Hold your peace a bit, sheriff," in sterner tones, as Kenmuir seemed about to burst forth afresh. "You can't get free without help, and all save me have turned back toward the Spectacle Rance."

"Curses cover 'em from head to foot!"

"All right, if cursing does you any particular good, sheriff. May I ask if you include me in that sweeping denunciation?"

Quietly the little fellow spoke, but there was a certain something in both tone and bearing that served to warn the angry officer not to let his fierce passions carry him too far.

"You certainly were of the party."

"With, but not of them," amended the Bantam. "I took more risk upon my head than you, perhaps, can give me credit for, simply because I didn't care to see even a pack of human bloodhounds punished more severely than their actions merited."

"We were simply doing our bounden duty, and you know it!"

"Yes, and knowing that much, I simply attempted to perform my duty, as well. If I could, I would have saved you from being daubed up after this fashion. You see," with a little laugh and brief strut, "I'm a professional beauty my own self, in a small way, and nothing jars more painfully upon my sensibilities than to witness even a plain mortal made hideous. And so—"

"Couldn't we listen better, boss, ef you was to onhitch us fu'at?" ventured Jim Dustin.

"Button lip, man!" savagely growled Kenmuir to his deputy. "Can't you see the runty imp has just come after, to mock at our helplessness?"

"There's one thing he'd ought to see with his eyes shut, and that is this: he's playing deputy to an infernally hot-headed idiot!" the Beauty retorted.

"Do you dare—"

"Oh, simmer down, before you put me to sleep, Bull-dog Johnny! Why wouldn't I dare, since you ask the question? I'm free, full-heeled, while you are mighty little better than a dead cock in a pit! If I cared to jeer you, would I take all this trouble to coax you into listening to cold reason?"

"If not that, what have you come for? If you're the friend you try to make us think, why don't you prove it by cutting our bonds?"

"Why wasn't Rome built in a single day? You're red-hot, and growing hotter rather than cooling off. You're big as two of me, so far as mere bulk goes. You think I'm one of your enemies—"

"Didn't you play us dirt, this very day?"

"And didn't I keep you from turning back to dust, only to-night? If I hadn't jumped in, and forced the gang to take a second thought, they would have strung you up dry, just so sure as I'm talking to you this minute. You know that, John Kenmuir."

The sullen fellow would not admit as much, yet he could not deny the plain facts. He remained silent, and Bantam Bob proceeded:

"You say I played you dirt, this day. Well,

I admit that much. I *did* try to keep you back, hoping to warn the man you meant to arrest."

"A vile assassin!"

"That may all be true, but I wasn't thinking of that, just then. I knew that this was to be his wedding-eve, and I knew that unless I could carry him warning in time for flight, an innocent young lady must suffer by far the heaviest blow. If I failed—but that don't count, just now."

"You know what came of your beating me to Spectacle Ranch, and you can form some little idea of what you may have to suffer if you refuse the aid I am offering you."

"Prove your good faith by setting us free, then; why don't you?"

"Wait yet a little longer, hot-and-hasty. I hardly think you would die of thirst or starvation before being picked up by some Samaritan, sheriff, provided your nags don't get scared badly enough to break away in a stampede. If they *should*—well, that's hardly an agreeable supposition, so we'll let it drop for now."

"Take the best view of it: say you are picked up and set free by some kindly-disposed person. Wouldn't the whole story spread throughout the entire country, with quips and jasts at your predicament? Why, man, the United States would be all too small to hide your shame-covered heads! Think of it! Sheriff John Kenmuir, painted!"

"Drop that, curse you!" fiercely growled that personage.

"Gladly, my dear sir," with another bland bow. "I merely touched upon the point, to make you realize a bit more clearly how great a boon I am able to offer you—on conditions."

"What conditions, then?"

"Very mild and simple ones, I assure you, sheriff. I'll set you at liberty, or give you the means of freeing yourself. You can renovate yourself with time and patience, until none save those who put you into this pickle would ever suspect the whole truth: and, for their own sakes, they'll hardly publish the facts abroad."

"Now, a little bit more history: you have no warrant, for I saw it destroyed. You have nothing to prove that you are an officer of the law, and while thus disarmed in every sense, you can't arrest any person, save at the risk of being treated as a highwayman yourself."

"Now, pledge me your word of honor as a man and an officer, that you will head for home, without stop or delay further than what is strictly necessary to obtain food and means of defending ourselves. Will you do this much, sheriff?"

"If I do, 'twill be to make all haste back, to play even!"

"That's all right, if you see fit to run the risk all over again," assented the Beauty from Butte. "Will you give me your pledge to this effect, then?"

"If you'll tell me what you hope to gain by it, why—"

"Excuse me, sheriff, but I believe I'm the one who has the right to impose conditions and arrange terms," interrupted the little man. "Give me the pledge I ask, both for yourself and for your deputies, now with you, and I'll keep my part of the contract. Yes, or no?"

"Say yes, boss!" eagerly voted Jim Dustin, backed by the voices of both Weaver and Harris. "We can't do nothin' else, anyhow; now the warrant is gone. Say yes, can't ye, man?"

Kenmuir hesitated, even yet. He had not been called "Bull-dog" for nothing. He felt to yield would be more bitter than death, and with all his faults, he was too honest to lie.

"No, be cursed if I'll promise anything but to play even with each and every devil of ye all!" he cried, hoarsely.

"Then that much is settled," quietly spoke Robert. "But *you*, my men: are you as great fools as your chief, or will you swear honestly to pull out for home, if I set you free?"

There was no delay in answering this question, and each man eagerly gave his pledge to that effect.

"All right, my honest fellows," said the Bantam, drawing his knife from its sheath as he added: "I'll give you freedom, and you can do as you like about setting your chief at liberty. Alone, and unarmed with either guns or warrant, he can do precious little harm save to his own fool's self. There's mighty little love in these parts for a sheriff, even among the honest portion of the community, and if I hated Bull-dog John, instead of pitying him, I'd ask no better sport than for him to try to make another arrest out here, without first arming himself as the law directs."

Using his knife, Bantam Bob cut the rope with which Jim Dustin's arms were bound behind his back, then leaving the weapon in his partly benumbed fingers, he drew away, saying:

"Take your time in doing the rest, my good fellow, and don't be in too great a hurry in turning Kenmuir loose. He might be crazy enough to follow after me, and that—well, if he *does*, just report it at headquarters as a case of suicide, will you?"

Without waiting to catch the full force of the execration which Kenmuir flung at him, the Bantam turned and ran swiftly over the moonlit

range, heading as directly as he could guess for Spectacle Ranch.

Despite his apparent carelessness as to pursuit, the little fellow cast frequent glances backward, only breathing with perfect freedom after he had completely lost sight of that little squad of horsemen.

"'Twould have served the hot-head right if I had taken his nag!" he mused, giving a bit of a sigh as he mentally estimated the number of miles he must cover before he could hope to catch his first glimpse of the Marshall place. "But that would have given Bull-dog Johnny a fair excuse to follow after, and much trouble as he has kicked up this night, I'd hate to shoot him—hate to, really!"

As time crept along, and Bob placed mile after mile behind him, without hearing or seeing aught of Sheriff Kenmuir and posse, he ceased thinking of them, turning his busy brain to other troublesome points.

Why had Julius Payne and the Hucks, father and daughter, slipped away so mysteriously? What fresh trouble was brewing?

Then, too, what had Old Nate meant when he spoke of such a glorious trick being played? How could he have known in advance that Sheriff Kenmuir would take his prisoner by that particular route?

"Through Billy Jacks, it may be, but even that don't begin to clear away the mists from other parts of the game. If Old Nate and his gal were willing to run such risks in rescuing Payne, why did they refuse to carry him warning that the sheriff was after him. They might easily have reached him in time, but—they didn't even try!"

Truly, as Bantam Bob told himself, the entire case was a puzzle beyond his solving, at least with his present scanty lights.

"But I reckon it's mighty well worth tackling, and if I can't get at the bottom facts, I'll—hello!"

He came to an abrupt halt, staring at a red reflection directly in his course, though far away, and until now hidden by a swell of the ground.

"A fire, dead sure, and—the Spectacle Ranch, by thunder!"

CHAPTER XVII.

AT THE SPECTACLE RANCH.

WHILE those enemies to his peace and composure were still beneath his roof, Dexter Marshall would not show how terribly hard this totally unexpected blow had fallen upon him.

Being an honest man, and just, so far as his lights admitted, he held back his worst passions when they urged him to strike and to slay, to spare not the man who surely had never given thought to mercy or pity for his people.

It was a hard strain, this facing a man so abundantly able to defend himself, hating him so fiercely, yet unable to do more than show a trace of that hatred by ordering him to depart without ceremony. If he could only have grappled with Bull-dog John, even if no longer than to have pitched him, head and heels, out of doors, that would have been some relief, and taken part of that suffocating weight off his brain and his heart.

As for Julius Payne—he dared not give a thought to him, as yet.

Not the least killing part of it all, was feeling forced by his stern sense of justice to ask leniency for the very man who had so cruelly dealt him and his this heavy blow.

It may be doubted whether any one who saw and heard him then, even in partial degree realized how hard it was for Dexter Marshall to do that act of common justice, or how natural it was for the reaction to follow so swiftly.

He made his appeal to the mixed assembly without, and saw Sheriff Kenmuir pass into the night with his prisoner, but he saw and heard nothing of what followed during the next few minutes.

A blinding mist fell over his eyes, a dizzy sickness overcame him, and with a choking groan of bitter agony, the strong man reeled back like one suddenly overcome with drink.

But little attention was paid to him, however. His wife was caring for their sorely-stricken daughter, in another room, and the wedding guests had matters far more exciting to think about.

All of the men, and not a few of the women, had passed out of doors, eager to see, if not take part, themselves hardly knowing whether they wished for the sheriff to win clear with his prisoner, or the exact opposite.

The ranch-owner did not fall, although that sudden illness robbed him of physical strength as well as dulled his brain. He sunk into a chair against which he blindly staggered, and there he sat, his powerful form bowed, his face buried in his hands, all shivering as from an ague.

If he heard the ominous sounds without, as the excited crowd menaced the sheriff and his posse, Dexter Marshall made no sign; that shivering remained just the same, nor did a change come until more peaceful sounds disturbed him.

He crouched there so still, so harmless in seeming, that after a while the women who remained in the room seemed to forget his very presence,

and their tongues began to run and rattle, wondering, guessing, and prophesying, as women will when they are granted a subject of such delicious interest and novelty.

As a matter of course, they were divided as to the guilt or innocence of Julius Payne, but the good people were undivided in their sympathy for Edith, poor child!

Dexter Marshall shivered afresh, and shrunk perceptibly as he heard them talking about his beloved child; wondering if she would ever rally from that dreadful shock, and how she would accept the arrest of her almost husband as a murderer, when she could fairly realize all that had taken place.

All this was part of his torture, but the usually strong, masterful man was powerless to check or to reprove, just then. That terrible faintness had left him weak and nerveless, even though he was now beginning to rally a bit.

Still, all was not bitterness. Among other things, he heard that Edith had rallied from her fainting-fit, and that her life was no longer in danger.

Then, after Sheriff Kenmuir had won fairly clear with his prisoner, some of the other guests came back, and as he caught muttering drops of pity from masculine lips, pride aided Dexter Marshall to rally more quickly than might otherwise have been the case.

He lifted his head, forcing a smile as he looked around the room, now so altered from what it had been when that accursed—

He said something, he never knew just what, then rose to his feet, one hand bearing heavily upon the back of the chair in which he had been sitting. He drove that ugly blur from his eyes, and held his whirling brain in check. Then, steady as though formed of wood and springs, the ranch-owner passed from that room into one where a long table was spread with the wedding feast.

Wines and stronger liquors stood at brief intervals upon this board, and grasping a decanter of pure brandy, Dexter Marshall held it to his lips, drinking long and deeply.

He was not acting blindly nor at random. He knew what he needed most, just then, and almost instantly he felt his usual powers coming back to him once more.

Replacing the decanter, he returned to the room in which the wedding ceremony was to have taken place, pausing short and glancing from face to face, a cold, grim smile creeping into his strong face as he heard murmured apologies for hasty departure.

"Of course, there is nothing to keep you here, friends," he said, speaking in tones remarkably clear and steady, for one who had so recently been unable to speak at all. "There's food in yonder, but it's just a plain supper, now there's no wedding to fit it with!"

That odd, unnatural smile became fixed as some of the guests ventured to express their sympathy. He let them have their say out, but it almost looked as though he was half-laughing, half-sneering at their too evident embarrassment.

In that they did him injustice, however, and his next words plainly proved as much, for all knew that Dexter Marshall scorned to lie, even in semblance.

"I'm thanking you in my heart, friends, although, somehow, I can't just shape my tongue to put it in words. I've been hit hard; mighty hard! I've suffered more than I ever thought man could suffer, and live; not for myself, but because of my little girl."

"I know," with a deprecatory gesture as words of sympathy were offered more freely, "You feel for us all, but I'd rather not hear it, just now. I wanted to say—I must say a few words before you go, neighbors, for maybe I'll never feel like talking so freely again. And—well, I reckon it's just as well to have a perfect understanding at the send-off."

"You all know why you were invited here, this evening. You all know what has happened to upset those plans. But maybe you're not quite so well posted as to other facts, and it's to them I wish you'd listen."

"If you really feel strong enough, Marshall," hesitated one of his closest friends. "If not—"

Dexter Marshall cut him short, by a low, hard laugh. He stretched out his mighty arms, tossing his head back proudly, his long locks of red, just touched with silver threads, giving his strong face and head a lion-like expression just then.

All trace of weakness fled, and the ranch-owner was himself again: the strongest, most powerful man in all that wide range.

"I'm strong enough, friends," he said, with grim significance. "It's only because I dared not use that strength as my heart dictated, that I turned weak for a short time. Now—let me have my say out, please."

"Some of you now present know that I never did take much stock in Julius Payne, as a man. We've had more than one little argument on that point, and I generally got the worst of it, too, simply because I couldn't back up my instinct with proof positive."

"Knowing I felt that way toward the fellow, I reckon some of you have accused me of being fickle-minded, because I finally agreed to let my

—let the match go on. And it's to just those people that I'm talking straightest, right now.

"I gave way, because I loved my little girl too mighty well to stand out against her wishes. I can't see just how it came so, but she couldn't see anything save good in the fellow! And so—well, I gave her a hug and a kiss extra, then told her she might have her own way.

"So much, friends, by way of clearing up," Dexter Marshall said, his tones growing harder after that bit of emotion. "Now—listen!

"I let Bull-dog John Kenmuir break all this up, and never lifted a finger in anger against him, although I would have given every hoof and horn I own, just for the right to fight him, man to man!

"Why did I do this? Because he had the law on his side, and however much I may hate its wrongs, as an honest man I'm bound to respect its rights. I did so, and in so doing, never did a harder day's work in all my life!

"I let him put irons on the man my child loved, on the man I had agreed to call son, on the one who had not an hour before, kissed and called my wife his mother!

"Why am I taking time and tasking your patience to go over all this, which you know just as well or better than I can tell you?" the ranch-owner asked, slowly, his face paling a bit more, his blue eyes catching a catlike gleam in the lamplight as they passed from face to face, as though their owner wished to fully note the effect of his words. "Simply in order to make you understand that I'm a law-lover, rather than a law-breaker, by nature and training. And since you know how much I've endured rather than break a law, you'll hardly have to ask if I'm in earnest when I tell you— Listen, please!

"Unless Julius Payne can and does prove his innocence of this foul crime—unless he can and does clear his skirts of even the faintest suspicion of wrong-doing—I swear by God and by heaven! I'll kill him like the cur I more than fear he really is! I'll kill him at the very bar of justice, if I can't get at him otherwise, for the bitter, black shame he's put upon my little girl this night!"

"But—if he's innocent?" ventured one of the guests, almost timidly, so awe-inspiring was that outraged father just then.

"If Julius Payne is innocent, which I'm trying mighty hard to hope, for her sake—then I'll run down and kill the one or ones who put up this infernal job on us all!"

A brief silence ensued. A feeling of uneasy embarrassment seemed to take hold of nearly all in the room, and once more that unpleasant smile crept back to the ranch-owner's face.

"That's all I wished to tell you, ladies and gentlemen, just now," he said, with a slight bow. "I thank you for listening so kindly. Now, don't stop on our account, I beg of you! The show is over, you see!"

He turned away with a short, bitter laugh, going to the chamber where poor Edith had been taken, leaving his guests to do as they saw fit.

A goodly proportion of them took their departure, with more haste than grace, but a few of the better-hearted, or more intimate friends, still lingered, loth to leave the sorely afflicted family alone in their sorrow and shame.

Outside were others, mainly cowboys, and all men, who lingered near, gathered in little knots to discuss the strange events of the evening in guarded whispers.

Dexter Marshall found his daughter far better than he had dared expect or even hope for. She had and was still suffering severely, but Edith had inherited much of his strength and something of his strong will power, both qualities standing her in good stead now.

Intensely as he loved this, his only surviving child, Marshall felt sadly out of place in her presence, just then, and leaving a kiss upon her white face, he returned to the lower floor.

Greeting the stanch friends who had remained, he led them into the room, where the wedding feast had been spread, almost forcing them to take seats and plates. He, himself, bore quantities of both food and drink outside for the cowboys, but he could not listen to their honest if blunt expressions of sympathy.

"I'm waiting for the right time to act, gentlemen," he said, as he lifted a hand to check their well-meant words. "Wait with me, and when that time comes, I'll be more than glad to have your backing."

So the time crept along, Dexter Marshall doing far more to make it pass agreeably to his remaining friends than he would have thought his duty, had all passed off pleasantly. Then came a startling alarm: a cowboy staggered breathlessly into the house, stained with blood.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE STEER BUCCANEERS' WORK.

"THE devil an' all to pay, boss!" he gasped, sinking to the floor like one whose strength is wholly spent.

He came without note of warning, and being on foot, had passed the men outside without attracting more than a casual glance, the moon-

light being insufficient to betray his actual condition to them.

Dexter Marshall sprung from his seat, and with a few long strides gained the side of the man, who lay like one completely exhausted, even if he had not received his death-wound.

A terrible thought, half hope, half fear, assailed the ranch-owner in those first few moments, and found partial expression in his hoarse words:

"You've not—it isn't lynching, Stevens?"

"No, boss," panted the cowboy, who was one employed on the Spectacle Ranch. "Wuss—rustlin'—cuss 'em!"

One of the wedding guests brought a decanter of whisky, and holding it to the eager lips of the cowboy, let him drink a strong dose, then withdrew the rest, to ask:

"How, rustling? Surely those devils haven't been at work again?"

"That's jest *what*!" declared the fellow, sitting up, flinging out his arms, the better to display his dilapidated condition as he added, grimly: "Don't I look sort o' that way, boss?"

"You're hurt? They hit you, Stevens?"

"No, not to say *hit* me, boss, but you're a mighty good pony out, to say nothin' of my bunch—clean gone, hide an' hoof, cuss 'em all!"

"That's enough for now," quickly cried Dexter Marshall, giving the man a lift and a gentle push toward the other room. "Go take a bite and sup, so you can talk straight when you're called on, man! And you, neighbors—"

"Are with you, Marshall!"

"Good! though I expected nothing shorter. If this is straight goods, and Stevens would hardly dare lie about it, the Steer Buccaneers have been at work again, and I'm just in the humor to make 'em eternally sick of it, too!"

Without wasting further words, just then, Dexter Marshall sprung out of the house, like one who is only too eager to improve the chance. Indeed, he fairly welcomed the news which, at any other time, would have come as a severe blow.

He was assailed by eager questions from the cowboys outside, for they had caught enough to know that something out of the usual run had transpired, but he had no time to particularize, simply saying:

"More rustling, men! All who care for a ride and a fight, saddle up and look to your guns!"

A hearty cheer greeted this speech, for a cowboy is generally ready for both riding and fighting, and a better leader could hardly have offered himself out of all that wide range than Dexter Marshall.

Even the few women who had remained at the Spectacle Ranch, seemed more than willing to do their part toward hastening pursuit, and while the men were catching up their horses, they were making up portable lunches from the still well-supplied table.

For a minute or two, all was bustle and apparent confusion, but in reality, each one was doing his part of the work, cutting neither time nor energy to waste.

Dexter Marshall singled out several of his friends among those who had remained when the "rats left the ship," and after a brief consultation, these hurried their women-folk away, heading each for home, there to gather reinforcements for the good work.

They had heard the report made by Stevens, now able to tell a connected story. That, boiled down, amounted to this:

He had been left to watch over a bunch of steers which Dexter Marshall had contracted to sell, and which was so tractable that one man was deemed sufficient to keep them in order for a few hours, thus permitting his mates to share in the wedding festivities.

He had been taken by surprise by a gang of men, who tried to shoot him down as he fled from capture. In place of hitting him, they had shot his pony, and he managed to evade pursuit by hard running.

The blood which marked his garments, came partly from his horse, partly from his nose, desperate exertions causing that organ to bleed freely.

"We've stood such devilish tricks plenty long, neighbors!" cried the owner of Spectacle Ranch.

"For one, I swear to make this raid cost the gang mighty dear! There's only one cure for rustling, and that is a thorough dose of hemp!"

"And no better time than right now to administer it!" boldly cried Paul Chapman, a young rancher who, himself, had suffered more or less severely through the Steer Buccaneers. "If we catch any of them, I move we string 'em up, without judge or jury!"

That hot speech struck the fancy of them all, and a united pledge was given to that effect. Then Dexter Marshall added:

"It's catching before hanging, though, neighbors, and the quicker we take the trail, the more apt we are to do that very catching! Watch for signal-lights, friends, but if you don't see any by the time you've got your boys, strike for the range where my bunch was rustled."

With this understanding, the men mounted and rode away, a few scattering out, each heading for home, the main body, under guidance of the cowboy, heading direct for the spot where he had been shot at by the Steer Buccaneers.

That swift gallop lasted until they reached the place, Stevens uttering a little cry and oath as he pointed forward:

"Look, boss! That's the pony which— Devil eat 'em up!"

A casual examination was given the dead pony, which bore traces of several shots, one of them having penetrated its brain, from the rear.

"'Twas meant fer me, cuss 'em!" growled the cowboy, as he pointed this out by the light of the lanterns, one of which he carried. "I felt its wind, an' ef I hedn't bin flattenin' out right piert, I do reckon I'd 'a' felt it a mighty sight harder, too!"

Nothing could be seen of either cattle or raiders, though the lay of the ground afforded them quite an extensive view. Not a head had been left, and as all were picked steers, ready fattened for market, the monetary loss would be heavy, unless they could regain the bunch.

But Dexter Marshall seemed far more anxious to catch the thieves than he did to recover his stock. In his present mood, he would have given up all hopes of the last, for a certainty of "locking horns" with the Steer Buccaneers, even with the odds all in their favor.

Although lanterns had been brought along to make all sure, the moon afforded ample light for those keen eyes to pick up and carry such a broad trail, so far as pursuit was concerned. Yet the artificial lights came in handily when an attempt was made to estimate the force of the rustlers.

"It's rough guessing in a hurry, pards," said Marshall, after taking a rapid circuit to count the number of horse-tracks near where the mad stampede had started, "but I don't reckon there's over a score of the imps—and we're good for double that number!"

"If they'll only let us come to a close, that is!"

"You, is it, Chapman?" asked Marshall, with a trace of surprise in his tones as the young rancher drew nearer his side, now that the chase had fairly begun. "I thought—that is—"

"I know, sir," and Chapman's voice lowered a bit as well. "I *did* mean to pull out, for a time, but— Well, you know how mighty hard I was hit, sir, and how—"

Marshall reached out a hand, which was strongly pressed.

"I do know, lad, and you had my best wishes, too. Only— Well, she's my last chick, Paul, and I couldn't deny her. You know that, boy?"

"Of course. I stood no show, and if he had been even half-way fit for his good fortune, I'd never whine nor whimper. As it is—curse his black soul!"

"Not yet, Paul. Wait until he's proved guilty. You were not at the ranch, though, this evening?"

"Yes, but I couldn't face—I kept outside," his voice far from steady, every word betraying strong emotion. "I couldn't help it, sir. I wanted to see—the last of my hopes!"

He spurred his horse away, as though unable to speak further on that painful subject. Dexter Marshall did not attempt to rejoin him, for he could fairly appreciate what Chapman must have suffered in witnessing the almost marriage of the maiden who had rejected his suit in favor of another man.

There was no difficulty experienced in following the trail, as a matter of course. The rustlers had started the bunch of steers in a stampede, as the surest and easiest method of getting them away from their range with speed and without straggling. And, once set in motion, the animals would keep straight ahead without pause or deviation, unless purposely checked or veered by the thieves.

So, having little more to do than sit their nags and ride hard, the pursuers had ample time for thought, part of which, at least, was given to marveling over this bold departure from the customary methods of the lawless gang locally known as the Steer Buccaneers.

As a rule, their maraudings were conducted with stealth, rather than dash. A small bunch of good stock would be picked up by night, and in four cases out of every five, would be effectually hidden or otherwise disposed of, long before their owner so much as suspected his loss.

This seemed petty thieving, compared with the vast operations which, in years gone by, used to mark the southern border, where an entire range would be swept bare at a single stroke; and yet, when all items were summed up with care, it could be seen there was much in favor of this more modern method, taking the rustlers' side of the question.

Their thefts were annoyingly numerous, and many litters make a mickle. Then, too, by using such care, very few of the selected stock came to harm, and were ready for market by the time the brands could be altered, or so blurred as to make deception an easy matter.

This was the very first time such bold tactics had been displayed, and only for the fairly general gathering of that night at the Spectacle Ranch, it would have been difficult for those now in pursuit to believe it was the work of the Steer Buccaneers.

"It's them, safe enough," Marshall said, in answer to some doubts expressed by a few of the

company. "They knew what was going on, and 'twould be an easy matter for them to make sure nearly all hands were gathered at my place. Then, by dropping Stevens, they could count pretty safely on rushing the whole bunch off the range, before we could catch wind of their doings."

"They did thar level purtiest to drap me, anyhow, cuss 'em!" growled the cowboy, fingering his guns as he rose in his stirrups to gaze ahead. "Ef I kin ketch a chance fer to even up, I'm bettin' long odds I'll throw cold meat what won't w'ar ha'r all over it, 'stead o' jest on top o' one eend!"

"There's others in your same fix, boy," grimly commented Marshall. "I feel as though a fight'd do me heap sight of good, just now, and yet, for the general good, I don't know but what I'd rather they'd get the bunch safely to their headquarters!"

"And lose both stock and fight?" asked Chapman, in surprise.

"If we found where the cunning devils stow away their plunder, I reckon we'd soon get both," retorted the rancher, with a grim laugh.

"I never thought of that!"

"Well, I have, many's the time, but we never before had such a fair chance to fetch it about as right now. You see, they've begun to slacken the cattle, so soon! Dollars to cents, they'll begin veering right for the point where we've lost so many trails before. But *this* time they've got too much on their hands to play their old tricks, and we'll be at 'em long before they can blind the trail."

A subdued cheer greeted this explanation, and some of the men interchanged hearty handshakes in their grim pleasure.

Hardly one of them but what had suffered more or less severe losses through this evil gang, and the prospects of "playing even" was hailed with delight.

The pursuit was pressed rapidly, and the condition of the trail taken note of at brief intervals. Everything seemed to favor a speedy overtaking, and when the first sign did come, it was caught by several pair of keen eyes at the same instant.

"Thar they be!" cried Stevens, among the rest, pointing excitedly ahead, where an indistinct mass could barely be seen.

CHAPTER XIX.

PREPARING FOR A FIGHT.

"RIGHT! Now we have got 'em!" excitedly cried Paul Chapman, jerking forth a gun, although the nearest portion of that indistinct mass was far beyond range of even his heavy revolvers. "One rush, gentlemen, and we'll begin paying off our old scores!"

"Steady, boy!" sharply commanded Dexter Marshall, by far the coolest of the twain, judging from outward appearances. "And you, friends, don't spoil a good thing by being in too big a hurry."

"But—your stock, Marshall!"

"If that's my bunch, they're ours, safe enough," came the still cooler retort. "What I'm figuring after, is the rustlers, don't you see? If we can corral *them*, curse the cattle!"

Chapman subsided, so far as words were concerned, but from his fiercely-restrained demeanor, it was plain he found this delay anything but pleasant.

Others leaned toward his view, but as Dexter Marshall was the one most deeply interested in the affair, financially speaking, and they had started out under him as leader, his wishes carried even more than ordinary weight just then.

"First thing's to make dead sure it is our game," the ranch-owner declared, quietly. "Keep back, below the swell, neighbors. If it's the outfit, no need to make a bigger show than we're obliged to just now."

His cool, matter-of-fact manner was already having the desired effect on his companions, and without a word of actual dissent, they waited.

As yet there was no actual certainty that what had caught their watchful gaze was indeed the stolen bunch of cattle under charge of the Steer Buccaneers, although the chances strongly favored that supposition. It was to settle this doubt, first of all, that Dexter Marshall gave his attention.

The suspicious point lay fully a mile distant, and resembled nothing more than a moving shadow, at first glance. The moonlight was hardly brilliant enough to show anything more, on keener inspection, but as the rancher mentally recalled the lay of the ground in that direction, he quickly came to the conclusion that the shadow was a living one, and almost certainly his own raided stock.

"It don't seem likely that another bunch should have strayed this way, friends," he said, drawing back from the swell crest. "None of you have stock on this bit of ground?"

A general negative was instantly given, and Chapman added:

"If 'twas a straying bunch, wouldn't they catch alarm as they struck this trail, sir? So I've always heard, at any rate."

"And rightly, from my experience, Paul," admitted Marshall. "Then, as the trail heads straight for that bunch, and there's no racket such as we'd surely hear if the rustlers were

frightened or trying to scatter the stock to play their old tricks, I reckon we've hit our game."

"And they're putting in good ticks, while we're wasting time here!"

"There's such a thing as being in too big a rush, Whitlow," retorted Marshall, with a short, grim laugh. "If that's really our game, they can't be traveling faster than a common walk, after the wind they've taken out of my bunch. And as for us, we've come a right lively jog, and when I enter a fight of this sort, I like to have a nag under me on which I know I can depend."

"And we can shoot straighter by daylight, eh?"

Dexter Marshall joined in the brief laugh which greeted that grim pleasantry, and in perfect good-humor he added:

"I'll hardly test your patience that far, Whitlow, but I do think we'll be gainers in the end if we take a few minutes right now, to settle our plans and make each man know just what ought to be done."

"I believe Mr. Marshall is right," spoke up Chapman, generously forgetful of his having been so neatly "called down" but a short time before. "I, for one, agree not only to listen to his plans, but to do my share toward carrying them out."

A general assent was given to this sentiment, and Marshall spoke again, not so much as a leader, but as one of a score.

"I'll give you my ideas, neighbors, but if a better trick offers, I'll jump at it, too might quick! First, then, we've never had such a fair chance offered us to down the Steer Buccaneers, as right now. That being the case, wouldn't it be a shame to throw away even the ghost of a chance to rid this section of such a curse?"

"We're all united on that point, be sure!" declared Whitlow.

"I knew that, without asking, gentlemen. And now, this is my scheme. There's no signs of our coming having been noted, as yet, and from the lay of the ground ahead, we'd ought to scoop 'em in, too mighty easy!"

"Divide up in two squads, one taking the right, other the left, cut around and ahead, then close in on the imps with a whoop and a hurrah! That's the whole of it, gentlemen, for when you get within range, never a soul of you but what understands his business far better than I can tell him!"

That was just the right touch which betrays the artist, and a subdued yet hearty cheer greeted the compliment.

"Since you seem to agree to my scheme, friends, the rest is easy enough to arrange. I claim the right to head one party, as it's my bunch of horns. Let Paul Chapman take command of the other, and—"

"You're only one-half right, Mr. Marshall," quickly interposed the young ranch-owner named. "I'm too hot-headed to play leader to much better and smarter men. Only a bit ago I had to be called down for that very weakness, and—"

"It's fighting now, not planning, Chapman."

"I'll do my share of the fighting, if I can get near enough, be sure of that," with a short laugh. "And to make dead sure of it, I'm going to volunteer under Dexter Marshall."

"And I'm too glad to have you with me to kick at your trying to upset my first idea, my lad," heartily replied Marshall. "Take a vote on it, gentlemen; but don't be too long over it, now we've caught our second wind."

Where all members were deemed good and true, it took little time to select the man to head the second squad, and that leader chosen, he at once accepted the position.

It was easy enough to divide the company into equal parts, for here, too, there was no necessity for picking and choosing; all were armed and each man was more than willing to do his share of the work.

Only a few more words were spoken. The distance each squad would have to cover was about the same, and should one strike the enemy a bit in advance, the coming of their allies would produce an even greater effect.

"Remember, then," said Dexter Marshall in parting, "it's get as close as possible before discovery, but when once seen, *close in and shoot to kill!*"

"That's what!" declared Whitlow, the leader of the second squad. "If any of the imps are left to pull hemp, they'll come from *your* side o' the ruck, Marshall!"

Separating, taking advantage of the lay of the ground, the two bands started upon their mission of revenge.

So confident had they been that they were in force sufficient to handle the enemy, that not one mention had been made of the reinforcements, until Paul Chapman mentioned the signals which Marshall had promised to send up on striking the rustlers.

"We haven't hit 'em yet, my boy," grimly replied the rancher.

"But we're mighty close to it, don't you think?"

"If they're still with the stock, yes. But—*are they?*"

"What? Surely you don't reckon they've sloped, Marshall?"

"I'd give every head of that bunch to be dead sure they hadn't fooled us again," came the low, savage answer. "It looks like a dead open and shut, from here, but—*isn't it just too easy?*"

From tone, rather than words, Chapman caught his full meaning, and as though silenced by that suspicious calmness in front, he said no more, waiting for what that scheme should produce.

Their suspense was not nearly so long as might have been expected, considering the amount of talking they had done before deciding upon their present course. Still, the fat steers had been pitilessly driven a goodly number of miles, and might well be too jaded for faster progress, particularly as there seemed no great need of haste.

Keeping behind a ground-swell, and guided more by calculation and instinct combined, than through sight or hearing, Dexter Marshall soon gained a position fairly on the flank of the herd; and then, with a whispered warning to look to their guns, he moved at an angle which would bring them to a commanding position over the rustlers, if these were where they ought to be, at the heels and flanks of their plunder.

Gaining a point from whence a fair view of the stolen stock could be obtained, Marshall halted his squad, then—

"Tricked, fooled!" came hissing through his locked jaws.

"It can't be!" said Chapman, pressing closer to his side.

"Look for yourself, man!" savagely retorted the rancher. "There's the cattle, easy enough, but—*where's the rustlers?*"

Sure enough, where were they? Not in plain sight, as they ought to have been, according to all calculations. Not a man was to be spotted on that side, or at the rear of the cattle, although these were slowly moving onward the while.

"Don't risk too much, Marshall," hastily warned Chapman, catching the angered rancher by an arm as he seemed on the point of dashing across the swell. "Wait a bit. Maybe the cunning imps have spotted us in chase, and have placed an ambush. Maybe they're on the other side, turning the bunch more to the northeast. Maybe—"

"Maybe the skies will fall! But we'll give Whitlow a chance for it, as you say, Paul."

As it was afterward shown, the second squad was passing through pretty much the same experience, and after the closest scrutiny failed to show them aught resembling an armed rustler, they closed in, to be shortly after joined by Marshall and his men.

Even before that junction was effected, one doubt was fully settled. This was indeed the stock run off from the Spectacle Ranch, and whose trail they had followed for so many miles.

Where, then, were the thieves? At what time or point had they abandoned their plunder? Were they still within reach, if hot chase was instituted?

"We've got to see 'em, or find their trail, before we can chase, I reckon," grimly observed Marshall. "Where are they, or it? Somebody else tell, for blamed if I know how!"

"They can't have skinned out so very long ago," declared Chapman. "If they had, wouldn't the cattle have halted before this? It was a sure enough raid, but—well, I'm dished!"

"Just as we've been dished many a time before! The likeliest thing I can think of is this: some of the imps started the main bunch, while others cut out a smaller—*God! what's that, back yonder?*"

CHAPTER XX.

A GLOOMY BRIDAL NIGHT.

SOME little time before Bantam Bob missed them at the timber island where Sheriff John Kenmuir and his deputies met with such vile punishment, Old Nate Hucks and "his gal Polly" stole away from that scene, mounted their horses and quickly yet silently beat a retreat, heading for the ford where the prisoner had been so boldly rescued from the officers of the law.

Like the wary old fox he had so often proved himself, Nathan Hucks took full advantage of the lay of the ground, and when the Beauty from Butte scanned the range for some glimpse of the missing people, they were bidden in a swale, which carried them fairly beyond eye-range.

Many a fit of grim chuckling did the old sinner indulge in, both before and after crossing that ford and heading more directly toward the Spectacle Ranch. And many a quaint quip and quirk fell from his tobacco-smeared lips, anent Bull-dog John and his experience on that eventful night.

"Thar's on'y one drawback to the hull blam' business!" he declared at length. "Ef I could jest 'a' hed his pictur' tuck, fer to send to the papers! Glory to the ram! Wouldn't he—jest?"

"You know what our part in the trick amounts to, pap, I reckon?"

"A mighty sight o' fun, fer one thing, Polly."

"And a notice to quit this range, for another!"

"Waal, that hain't so mighty shore, Polly, look at it my way."

"Don't you know that Kenmuir'll come back, red-hot, to play even? Don't you know that he spotted every soul of us? You couldn't miss his eye, pap, with that face, voice and figure!"

"That's all right, Polly," with sudden irritation in his tones. "Ef he *did* think I was thar, cain't I prove I wasn't anyways nigh the spot?"

"An *alibi* wouldn't satisfy him, and you know it, pap."

"Waal, what matter? Hain't we gwine to rack out, anyhow? He cain't do nothin' 'thout gittin' fresh papers an' a new fit-out, kin he? An' won't we clean all up, long afore he kin go an' git back, this fur?"

"If the rest of the scheme works as smooth-ly, perhaps yes: but—will it, though?"

"Why wouldn't it, then? Hain't the hull trick bin studied out, an' bin gone over times 'nough? Hey? What's ketched you, gal? Ontel jest right now, who's so phizen sart'in as Polly? Go 'long, gal!"

Polly made no reply to that indignant speech, but rode in silence, her head drooping, her attitude that of one whose heart or brain is but ill at ease.

This dejection, so unusual in his daughter, and coming just as it did, cast a damper over the high spirits of Old Nate, and a touch of superstition assailed him. What if her doubts were prophetic? What if ugly misfortune really awaited them, just when their intricate scheme looked most certain of complete success?

He fought against that ugly doubt, however, and by constantly dwelling upon the discomfiture of "Bull-dog John" Kenmuir, for whom he entertained a most hearty hatred, the old fellow at length succeeded in restoring his own confidence.

That point carried, Old Nate gave time and argument to brightening up "his gal," and by showing her how improbable were her doubts, how surely the remainder of their plans must prove entirely successful, he finally succeeded, there, as well.

All this while they had been pressing onward as rapidly as their good mounts could well carry them, and such good time was made that they came in sight of the Spectacle Ranch before Stevens, the cowboy, startled the remaining guests by putting in his report of robbery and attempted assassination.

They had no desire to herald their arrival, and passing well to the rear of the ranch, they concealed their jaded horses in good cover, then cautiously crept near enough to witness all that followed the coming of the blood-stained cowboy.

Throughout all that bustle and seeming confusion, Old Nate and his daughter lay low, watching and taking notes, the old fellow chuckling as though in high glee, Polly silent, yet to the full as deeply interested as her sire.

"Take note o' all as don't go, Polly," Hucks whispered, as the ranchers were preparing for the road. "Stay hyar, while I crawl over yander, so we'll hev a wider stretch o' lookin' at 'em all!"

From their separated posts of observation, it was no difficult task for the twain to reach a fairly accurate conclusion, knowing as they did, nearly every man and woman in that part of the State, by sight at least.

When the party rode off, a few to hasten to their widely separated homes, there to gather reinforcements from the cowboys left in charge during their employers' absence at the wedding, the main force to ride at top speed for the point where the cattle had been "rustled," father and daughter came together for the purpose of comparing notes.

"Didn't I tell ye, Polly, all was dead shore fer to run off slick as melted taller?" chucklingly observed Old Nate. "Not a man critter left at the ranch, an' skeercely a woman, 'cept the old heifer an' her dainty calf! Eh?"

"So far as I could see, pap, you're about right," replied Polly, in a lighter, more cheerful tone than she had been able to muster since that sudden fit of gloomy doubt took possession of her brain. "Now, get down to solid business! Call the boys, and finish it up, pap!"

"Cool an' easy, gal," quoth the elder sinner, twisting off a fresh chew of tobacco from a heavy plug. "Give 'em a chance to find out ef they've fergot any thing as'll fetch any on 'em back ag'in, cain't ye?"

Polly flung out a hand, impatiently.

"Time's precious, pap, and we can't afford to throw away a single chance, now we've gone in over-head. It's win or die, and *you'd* ought to know that much!"

"Which is jest the why I'm gwine fer to make sure it's win, Polly. Which is why I'm gwine to be dead shore none o' them critters is comin' back fer any thing they done fergot in tha'r hurry."

"Others may come, though! The entire range's afoot this night, and—see if the men are at hand, or I'll do it myself, pap!"

When Polly Hucks took that tone, Old Nate knew he must yield or fare worse. Argument was out of the question, because Polly wouldn't stoop to receive it, no matter how coaxingly, nor how pertinent that argument might come.

With a half-growl, the old fellow rose from his comfortable position and the couple passed

stealthily around, until at a certain point where hidden from view of the house. Then Old Nate gave a low, peculiarly modulated whistle, which was almost instantly answered by a similar note, and quickly followed by two rough-clad, fully armed men.

Not a word passed between them, but with a single gesture, Polly made them understand the time for work had rolled around.

One of them dropped a bundle to the ground, and opening this, handed forth masks of rudely arranged sacks, which concealed face and head alike. This, with a few minor changes of dress, completed the masquerade, and signing the two ruffians to follow closely, father and daughter passed over to the ranch, entering the building, and at once running up-stairs to the chamber where Edith Marshall had been conveyed after her swooning away.

The poor girl had rallied wonderfully, considering the terrible blow which had been dealt her, but she was poorly prepared to cope with this fresh excitement. A scream broke from her lips as she caught sight of those masked figures, and one of them sprung to her side, in hoarse, unnatural tones crying:

"Shet, or you'll ketch wuss! Ef you—"

With a cry of motherly fear, Mrs. Marshall sprang to the aid of her child, only to be brutally stricken down with a clubbed pistol.

There were two other women in the chamber, friends of the family, but neither of them dared interfere, or even utter a cry for help. The abductors menaced them with pistols, and one of them, in a disguised voice harshly said:

"Kick up rusty, an' we'll bloody murder ye both! Stay right hyar. Don't give a yawp, nor yit try to skin out. Ef ye leave this room, you croak—sure as thar's life in ye now!"

While the women were being frightened into submission, poor Edith was being bound and blindfolded by the more youthful member of the party, and then, seemingly more dead than alive, she was picked up and carried down stairs, through the room below, out into the night.

Once outside, Old Nate hurried with their captives over to where their horses were in waiting, while Polly Hucks lingered to give their masked allies their final instructions.

"Keep all eyes open, boys, and remember your pay depends on the care with which you perform your share of the game. Don't let those fool women get away, too soon. Don't hurt them, if you can help it, but keep them here, no matter at what cost."

"That's easy, but how 'bout t'other job?" asked one of the pair.

"You've had orders on that point: carry them out!" curtly answered Polly, turning away to run swiftly along the course her father had taken with their captive.

She found him beside the horse, but answered his growl of impatience with a low, careless laugh. She sprang into the saddle, then bent over to receive the nearly unconscious maiden in her arms.

Not a word was spoken while this arrangement was being completed, yet that caution could hardly have been through fear of having their voices recognized by their helpless prize, since, later, they showed no such caution.

Mounting his own horse, Old Nate led the way at a fair pace, keeping as well covered as their destination would permit. Their only halts were when a change of burden became advisable; and whenever Edith, who was reviving under the combined motion and the fresh night air, would have spoken, to ask mercy or cause, she was harshly silenced, by threats of still worse penalty.

Mile after mile was placed behind them, and their backward glances at length grew more frequent, as though they were anticipating some fresh event, already due. And that such was the case, the grim chuckle which Old Nate presently gave at catching sight of a faint, dull glow in the direction of Spectacle Ranch, amply proved.

"Looks purty, even so soon, don't it?" he muttered, in a voice which he took no further pains to alter to avoid recognition. "What'll it be when she comes to a full head o' steam, pardner?"

"No names, remember!" warningly muttered his daughter, drawing rein and wheeling her horse, now doubly laden again. "Wait until it looms up, then—wait, I say!"

Old Nate looked dubiously on as he saw her hand fumbling at the blindfold, but he did not interfere when Polly removed it, to say:

"Look yonder, my lovely bride! 'Tis in *your* honor, remember! A gay sight, and a gayer bridal-night, isn't it, Mrs. Julius Payne?"

CHAPTER XXI.

A NECK IN THE NOOSE.

BANTAM BOB came to an abrupt halt on catching his first glimpse of that ruddy glow, little witting that from two other points, all widely separated, other eyes were regarding that same tell-tale beacon at that precise instant.

Although by no means as thoroughly posted as he could wish, thanks to his brief sojourn in that section, the Beauty from Butte instantly jumped to the right conclusion: that lurid glow surely came from very near the Spectacle Ranch, if

indeed it was not caused by the destruction of the Marshall home itself.

"But how? Who? What for?"

In a flock the questions flashed across his brain, and before he could answer one, still others came to the front so rapidly that Bantam Bob gave over trying to solve the puzzle in its entirety.

"More deviltry, and that's enough for a hog!" he muttered, once more in motion, pressing straight for that night-beacon. "Will they never get left? Will they never grow tired? And yet—is this their work, or is it an accident?"

It was a sheer impossibility to refrain from asking questions, even while resolving not to ask them. His brain kept working in time with his legs, and that was at a marvelously rapid pace, considering the amount of work they had already performed since the sun last set.

In spite of the plain fact that they were mixed up in a more than suspicious case, where at least one charge of transgressing the law could be sustained against them, Bantam Bob held a soft spot in his heart for Old Nate and his gal, Polly, for had they not saved his life that evening?

And yet, in spite of this tender sentiment, the little fellow could not help feeling those twain were connected with this new act in the intricate drama with which he had so unexpectedly become involved.

Was it for this that they had stolen away from the punishment of the sheriff and his deputies? And yet—what ends would they hope to serve by committing such an act of barbarism?

"You're a fool, boy!" Bantam Bob told himself, banishing those ugly suspicions by main force, and doggedly racing toward that red light. "What'd they want to do it for? And if they *did* want, how could they? Just two—or three, counting in the boss—and Marshall in anything but a sleeping humor, with enough friends to—Get out, man!"

That was rea-on, but instinct declined to take to flight, and while the Beauty could not show cause for such a belief, nevertheless he *did* believe that the Huckses, if not Julius Payne himself, was connected with yonder fire-glow.

"It's not a prairie-fire, because there isn't grass tall enough or thick enough to raise such a big glow," he reasoned, while pressing onward with unflagging vigor. "Then, too, it sticks to one spot, which a wild-fire wouldn't do. So—it's the ranch or ranch buildings, safe enough!"

If the other points might be as surely solved!

Bantam Bob finally gave over trying to clear the tangle, wisely waiting until he could gather evidence for himself: the first of which came when he topped the ground-swell from a portion of which he had, on another occasion that same night, caught his first glimpse of the Spectacle Ranch.

"Not so bad but it might be worse!" he ejaculated, as his eager eyes told him the house was still standing, as yet untouched by the flames which had attacked the stables and other out-buildings. "But—where's the crowd?"

There was none, so far as he could tell by that first glance, and knowing what a trifle might lead to the destruction of the ranch-house itself, Bantam Bob passed only long enough to catch one needed breath, then raced down the gentle slope, rounding the gully and making all practicable haste to lend his mite toward saving valuable property from total destruction.

As he drew nearer, he caught sight of several men at work about the ruins: they could be called nothing better, now. They wore cowboy costume, and not one among them at all resembled the owner, who surely ought to be foremost in fighting the flames which were devouring his substance.

Then—

"I just *knew* it!" ejaculated Bantam Bob, checking his pace as his keen sight singled one figure from the rest. "*Billy Jacks!*"

A second look confirmed this discovery, and the Beauty came down to a walk, one hand mechanically seeking the pistols at his belt. His mind flew back to the taking of the white gelding, and the industrious manner in which Billy Jacks had attempted to "fan" him with his guns.

"Wonder if he'd be fool enough to try that over?" mused the little fellow, still advancing, though more leisurely, now that he could see the few cowboys had fairly gained the upper hand of the fire, so far as keeping it from spreading to the house itself was concerned. "Surely not if I can get in a word or a sign, first!"

Somewhat reassured on that ugly point, Bantam Bob broke into a dog-trot which quickly carried him over the remaining rods of space, heading for the house rather than for the fire, urged thus by a rapidly-growing curiosity, at the bottom of which lay the question: where was Dexter Marshall?

Robert almost came into collision with a woman at the open door, both recoiling with little exclamations, but the man being first to recover, asking the question which was troubling his mind just then:

"Where's Marshall? Why isn't he here? What's happened, ma'am, if you'll be so good as to—Oh, holy smoke! Talk—talk, can't you?"

"You're not—I don't know you, sir, but—such work! such awful work as this night has brought!"

The frightened, agitated woman flung up her hands with a sobbing cry, and seeing that she was on the verge of hysterics, Bantam Bob paid her no further attention for the moment, but brushing past her ample figure, passed through the lower rooms, then mounted the flight of stairs in his determination to get at the root of all this mystery, if cheek or persistence could accomplish aught.

He found two other women in the chamber from whence poor Edith had been abducted, and despite their own natural fears, they were working over Mrs. Marshall, striving in vain to restore her senses.

Bantam Bob quickly explained that he was a friend to the family, and while inspecting the nature of Mrs. Marshall's hurts, he begged the women to explain what had happened there.

This they did, with tolerable clearness, and by the time he had completed that inspection, Bantam Bob was in possession of a fairly accurate account of the affair.

The men-folk had all been drawn away from the ranch by the Steer Buccaneers, and then Edith had been taken away by force, her mother being left unconscious from a brutal stroke on the head. Then came the fire, and—On, what a night it had been!

Although not a surgeon, Bantam Bob was experienced enough in such hurts to feel sure Mrs. Marshall was badly injured by that dastardly stroke, even though his gentle touch failed to discover a fracture of the skull. And when the question was put to him, he gave an honest reply, so far as his lights permitted.

"I'm afraid she'll be worse before she's better, ma'am, but I don't see that you can do better than you have, so far. If she should rouse up before her man comes back, and ask for her daughter, keep her quiet, even if you have to lie like a whitehead! Make her think the girl is safe, and all right, or you'll have a crazy woman to deal with!"

"You think they'll come back—soon?" quavered one of the women. *My man went, too, and—* Oh, why don't they come back?"

"The light'll fetch 'em, never fear," he hastened to assure her. "It fetched me, and I haven't nearly so much at stake: just my weenty self, and most people would say that didn't count! Now—keep her quiet, above all things, remember."

Feeling that he could do nothing more in that quarter, and hoping to gain at least a clew to the authors of this fresh outrage, Bantam Bob left the chamber, passing down-stairs and out of doors, heading at once for the still hotly burning stables and sheds.

The cowboys were at work, though there was little they could do save confine the fire to what it had already fastened upon, and prevent the flying sparks and embers from igniting the house, or other structures hard by.

Bantam Bob failed to catch sight of Billy Jacks as he approached, but that fact caused him little uneasiness. Even should the cowboy recognize him as the one who had stolen the white gelding, he surely would not dare to kick up a row, after what had happened since that confiscation act!

"An' whar'd you come from?" bluntly demanded one of the cowboys, as the odd-looking little fellow sent his query in advance. "Mebbe you done sot it to goin', then?"

"Maybe I didn't, then!" retorted the Beauty, with equal bluntness. "Maybe you did, if it comes to that, for—"

That sentence was cut short, for a noose dropped over his neck, from the rear, and a vigorous jerk flung him to the ground with a shock that fairly drove the breath out of his lungs, and half-stunned him.

"Nail him, pard!" cried Billy Jacks, keeping his lasso taut as a preventive against dangerous action on the little fellow's part. "Jump on the durn critter, an' pull his teeth, fu'st-off!"

That warning was breath spent in vain, for the cowboys were doing just that, without waiting for instructions from the *riata*-hurler. And before Bantam Bob could even think of feeling for a weapon, his guns were taken from him, and several pair of strong hands held him helpless, even had that suffocating noose not been about his throat.

"Don't let him lie to ye, pard!" cried Billy Jacks, as his mates jerked their prisoner to his feet, thus slackening the noose. "Ef he gits to talkin'—"

"Talkin's jest what we want, I reckon," interrupted one of the men, as he still further slackened that loop. "Out with it, cuss ye! What made ye sot fire to— Spiel, or croak, dug-gun ye!"

"I never—he lies!" gasped Bantam Bob, giving an eel-like twist and squirm which almost set him free from their grasp.

"No ye don't, Jim-jsey! It's a hangin' a'fa'r, this sort, an' ef ye can't cl'ar yourself o' the nasty trick, up a tree ye climb, too mighty quick fer any sort o' use!"

Beginning to realize his danger, Bantam Bob ceased his vain struggles, forcing a calmness which he was far from feeling in reality. He

twisted his head around to catch a glimpse of Billy Jacks, then said:

"You don't dare say it to my face, you cur! Instead of being here to kindle this fire, I was risking my life to save the other lives you and your mates put in peril, at the ford! If you—"

"Whar's the use o' chawin' wind? Hang 'im up, I'm sayin'!"

CHAPTER XXII.

BILLY JACKS ACCUSES.

"An' hyar's what backs Billy up in that!" another of the fellows cried, hardly less venomously. "I'll take oath we ketched the pizen critter startin' the fire, only he snoke off afore we could freeze fast to him! Pitch him in the fire he started! Roast the devil!"

"Two of a kind, and I'd hate to say which is the dirtiest liar!" indignantly spluttered the little fellow. "If there's a white man among ye, give another a chance to clear himself!"

"Chaince be durned!" cut in Billy Jacks, his eyes blazing evilly. "Don't let him ham-boozle ye, pard! Pull rope, or eat fire! Make sure o' him, afore his mates kin come to snatch him 'way from justice!"

Fortunately for the captive, there was at least one "white" man in the bunch, and he rudely shoved back the traitor as he tried to catch Bantam Bob by the throat and choke back what might prove dangerous speech.

"Stiddy does it, pard! Ef he's really the fire-bug, we'll sarve him out to the queen's taste, but—provin' fu'st!"

"You're white, and they can't prove a lie," declared the Beauty, with more composure than he had been able to display before. "As for Billy Jacks, he's one—"

A cowboy hat came heavily against his face, and having cut short that dangerous accusation, Billy Jacks was about to follow it up with a more deadly assault, when the rapidly growing sound of many hoof-beats startled them all, and caused a temporary truce.

At the head of that furiously riding party, came Dexter Marshall, his panting steed covered with a lather of sweat and froth, his hoarse yet readily recognizable voice coming to their ears, although the words themselves were inarticulate, as yet.

"Good!" cried the cowboy who had charge of Bantam Bob, and who had almost certainly saved him from death, so far. "It's the boss o' the Spectacle, fer one! Now he kin say what—"

Bantam Bob lifted his voice to its topmost pitch, rather oddly, as it seemed, contenting himself with uttering the name of Dexter Marshall, tacking to it the name of a Biblical city.

Like an echo, came back a single word; likewise the title of a city mentioned in Holy Writ.

There was time for no more, and before the treacherous cowboy could carry out his evil intent, the burly ranch-owner dashed up, leaping out of the saddle without wasting time in drawing rein, as his feet struck the ground, crying:

"Who called—brother?"

"I called for help, brother," boldly replied Bantam Bob, with a sudden wrench and twist freeing himself from that slackening grasp. "I ask help, by word and grip!"

"You shall have it, if you are deserving, but—who's done all this foul work?" sweeping his eyes over the glowing ruins.

"He did, fer one!" boldly cried Billy Jacks, pointing at the Beauty. "We see him sneakin' off, jest as the fire got good an' goin', an'—"

"He lies when he says that, and I can prove my innocence, brother!" just as forcibly declared the little man. "Before heaven, I believe he did the foul deed himself!"

Dexter Marshall flashed a fiery glance from face to face, then sternly spoke:

"One or the other must be lying, so—take charge of them both, Poston! Pick your men, and guard them close. Keep them from talking to each other, or to any others."

Billy Jacks began to protest, and in his hot rage went so far as to jerk forth a gun; but Poston, boss of the Spectacle cowboys, promptly knocked him down and disarmed the fellow.

Bantam Bob, more sensibly, rather invited capture than sought to evade it. He knew that escape was out of the question, and he counted confidently on proving his innocence of that dangerous charge.

Knowing that he could depend fully upon his foreman, Dexter Marshall hurried off to the house, there to receive another terrible shock.

His dearly loved daughter was missing, his wife lying in a stupor which horribly resembled death.

Only an unusually strong man could have borne up under such an accumulation of shocks, but Marshall quickly rallied, and forced himself to outward calmness while closely questioning the woman who had witnessed that abduction.

They could tell him little beyond the mere facts: that four persons, masked by sacks over their heads, and otherwise disguised, had assailed them, striking down the mother as she attempted to defend her child, then bearing Edith away; but one of the women, Mrs. Whitlow, gave Marshall a possible clew when she declared that one of the quartette was a woman!

"She wore men's clothes, but her walk and figure was that of a woman, sure as I'm living right now!"

"A woman!" echoed Marshall, in dull amazement. "Who was she?"

But that was beyond her telling. It was a woman, and a young woman at that; but beyond that bare fact her knowledge did not extend.

Abel Whitlow had accompanied Marshall to the chamber, and now suggested:

"Maybe you can get more out of those fellows down yonder, neighbor. Doc's there, too, and he ought to be looking for your wife."

Marshall hastened out of the room, and called hoarsely to the one medical man who luckily happened to be with them. A few words sent him to his duty, then the ranch-owner, pale as a corpse, his eyes glowing, advanced to put the guarded men to the question.

As Bantam Bob chanced to be the one first reached, he was the first questioned, but as he knew nothing, so he frankly declared his ignorance.

"I wasn't here, sir, until it was all over. I came, attracted by the show of fire. I tried to help your wife back to consciousness, as the ladies with her can testify, but that is all I know about her being injured."

"I b'lieve he's a durn liar, boss!" viciously called forth Billy Jacks, who was guarded near enough to hand for his strained ears to catch that explanation. "Pinch the critter, an' he kin tell, ef he will!"

"What makes you so confident?" asked Marshall, with forced composure. "What grounds have you for charging this person with having committed this infernal outrage?"

"No grounds at all!" sharply cried the Bantam.

"Button up!" growled Marshall, then adding to Poston: "If he tries to talk before I ask him, clap a gag in his mouth. And you, my fine fellow," turning once more toward the cowboy, "want to weigh your words before spitting them out. I mean to get at the bottom facts in this case, and I mean to kill every devil who had part or lot in carrying it out. Now, your reasons, sir!"

"Waal," sulkily began Jacks, his eyes drooping before that stern gaze, "fer one thing, I kin take oath he's one o' the dirty gang as hatched up all o' this trouble, but I do reckon he was workin' under orders o' the boss—Boss Payne, ye understand?"

Marshall gave a start, but quickly rallied. "What can Julius Payne have had to do with this part of the outrage? Careful, now!"

"Mebbe nothin', mebbe a mighty heap, but, sence he's got loose—"

Startled cries and ejaculations drowned his words, and Billy Jacks seemed a bit more at ease as he weighed the different expressions which fell from surrounding lips, before Marshall quelled the tumult by begging silence, if not patience.

"Think of all I have at stake, gentlemen, and don't throw obstacles in the way of my getting at the truth," he implored, earnestly. "If Julius Payne has got loose—how do y' know so much about it?" he asked the cowboy, that dangerous glow coming back to his eyes.

"Waal, I'm more'n ready to tell ye, boss, an' ef I go back a good ways, it's jest to make all plain as a stampede trail. An' so, I was at the Pea-vine, when Sheriff Kenmuir and his posse come up. They said yen' cussed runt hed fetched 'em all that way, 'lowin' as how Payne was to home, when he knowed mighty sight better!"

"Then, what does he do, but cut an' slash the boss-riggin' on the sheriff's critters, an' then steal Snow-squall, Payne's best hoss! We ketched sight o' him as he broke away, and tried to drap him, but made a miss out of it."

Ugly mutterings came from the crowd of ranchers and cowboys at this serious accusation, and without waiting for orders to that effect, Poston caused the Bantam to be securely bound with a lasso.

"Nur that don't begin to tell it all, nuther," declared Jacks, hugely elated by his success, thus far. "I reckoned the imp'lowed fer to warn Payne o' what was in the a'r, an' so I told Kenmuir I'd guide him this way, hopin' we'd git here in time to save the—"

"Pass that," sternly warned Marshall. "Go on, and tell how you came to learn of Payne's escape."

"Waal, that come 'round like this, boss: Ye see, Kenmuir be 'lowed mebbe he wouldn't let stop the night right hyar, even ef 'twould be safe, seein' as he knowed Payne b'longed to the rustlers, an' so he axed me ef I wouldn't keep a eye out, an' show him the short cut back to the Pea-vine, whar he could hang up the rest o' the night, an' sich."

"I didn't jest like the job, fer I hain't any too much use fer men o' his caliber, but—waal, he summonsed me, like, an' I reckoned I hed to do it that way. An' so, wher he set off, like, I jined in, an' tuck him by the upper crossin'."

"Payne never give no sign o' mischief, an' I don't reckon any one o' us give a thought that way, afore it come—red-hot! Right when we was at the crossin', boss! An' as I see Kenmuir keeled over, by a gun-lick from a critter as thar

wasn't no mistakin' of his size nor looks, dug-gun him!"

"You mean *him*?" with a nod toward Bob.

"Jest *him*, boss," declared Billy Jacks, earnestly. "I see so much, an' then I see a hull gang comin' in a rush. An' so—waal, I skinned out, the shortest way I knowed, which was down the crick!"

"I got cl'ar, somehow, an' from lower down, I ketch'd a glimp' o' the sheriff an' his men, bein' toted off to the open. Then—waal, I reckoned *that* wasn't the sort o' puddin' fur me, an' so I come down this way, to tell the news."

"When I come in sight, the fire was jest startin', an' I ketch'd sight o' a runt sneakin' off, like, an' then—waal, I didn't dest to chase him, fer fear o' the fire's ketchin' the house. So I sot to work, 'long of Bill, yender, who come up jest then, fer to fight the flames."

"That's all, boss. Ef I'm lyin' hope to die! He sot the fire, jest as he help'd set Payne free, an' jest as he stole Snow-squall! Mebbe he kin tell ye who run off Miss Marshall, too, ef you pinch him!"

"And that 'he' is Billy Jacks!" boldly asserted Bantam Bob. "He led Kenmuir into the trap, and I saw him knock him off his horse!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE BANTAM REFUTES.

BILLY JACKS certainly had been disarmed, only a short time before, but just as certainly he now gripped a revolver, cursing viciously as he tried to shoot that bold speaker; only tried, for Dexter Marshall knocked up his hand, then caught his wrist with a wrenching grip that not only flung the weapon far away before a second shot could be fired, but wrung a bowl of pain from the knave's lips.

A single glance showed Marshall that the murderous attempt had been foiled, the lead flying high in air, then he sternly cried:

"Hold easy, Billy Jacks! You've had your say-so, now we'll listen to his, in turn."

"He'll lie ontel you—"

"Simmer down, I tell you! Keep an eye on him, Whitlow, and if he tries any more dirty tricks, down him—*hard*!"

"You bet I will, now!"

The Bantam might have turned a shade paler at his narrow escape from death, but if so, that was his sole symptom of weakness just then.

Even he must have seen that ugly feelings had been stirred against him by the bold lying of the cowboy, and that it would take but precious little more to set honest men in place of knaves to playing haugmen, with his own luckless self as victim.

Possibly if Billy Jacks had not made that attempt to shoot him while he himself was helplessly bound, that interrupted lynching might very well have been completed by other hands. As it was, black looks and silent threats were far too numerous for comfort.

As it was, that murderous attempt rendered it a bit easier for Dexter Marshall to check the storm, and once more the ranch-owner demanded a truthful explanation from the accused.

"I don't know as I can blame you so mighty much for asking, brother," quietly said the man from Butte, "for it's plain enough that *one* of us fellows has lied without law or gospel. I say Billy, Billy says I'm the sinner. So, start us even, pardner, and let the cripple pull hemp!"

"Speak plainer, if you please, sir," warned Marshall, with dangerous calmness. "I'm after the naked truth, and—"

"The surest way to get that, sir, is to put us both where we stand on a level; he's loose, able to skip out in case he sees the rope swinging his way, while I'm trussed up worse than a fowl for the spit. Turn me free, or else ornament Billy after the same fashion."

"He's jest talkin' to gain time, cuss him!" cried the cowboy, with a show of honest indignation. "Make him tell who help'd him tote off the young leddy, boss!"

"I swear I had no finger in that pie, sir," earnestly said Bantam Bob, fixing the eye of the rancher with his own. "I swear it by word and by grip; I swear it by the sign," at the same time letting his gaze fall to the badge worn by Marshall, a slight inclination of his head the more surely pointing his meaning.

A trembling hand rose to touch that badge, as though the wearer felt the need of some restraint to keep his grip off that accused one.

"Clear yourself if you can, for, if you can't—all the oaths and grips this side of eternity can't even begin to save you from punishment!" the rancher declared, his voice and face showing something of the mental tortures he was undergoing. "Explain, and quickly, too!"

"All right, sir, if you really reckon I was asking more than a fair shake. I'm no hog, if I do grunt occasionally. Now—here you have it, as nearly as I can boil it all down, gentlemen."

"I don't suppose there's any need of my going 'way back, to explain just how and why I chanced to tumble down into this range. You can see for yourselves that I *did* come, and that I'm right *here*, even if not precisely right in your minds."

"Boil it down, will you?" harshly growled Marshall.

"I'm no cook, sir, but I'll do my little best to suit your views, for all that. Well, as you let Billy, yonder, go back as far as the Pea-vine, and Bull-dog Johnny's getting there, I reckon I can claim just as much latitude."

"I *did* guide Kenmuir and his deputies there, simply because they had me held up before I had a chance to run away. They asked me if I could show them the place where a gentleman called Julius Payne hung out when he was at home, and I said I could."

"Now, gentlemen, you want the truth, and nothing but the truth, of course. Only for knowing so much, I might slip in a bit of a lie right here, something on the style of Billy Jacks; but I'll tell the whole truth, if it shames the devil's imp, as well as his Majesty himself!"

"I don't like an officer of the law, and I never did. 'Twas born in me, I reckon, for I've had the same feeling ever since I can remember what a fly-cop looked like! And so—well, I came just as near playing the whole outfit dirt, as lay in my bones!"

"Cut it short," sternly bade Marshall. "What we're after are plain facts, not fancy talking. Go on, now."

"That's all right, pardner, but you let Billy sing his song, and never called him down for cramming it chuck full of false notes. I'm sticking to the tune, closer than a hungry leech, and it only makes me lose time when you turn over two leaves at once. Where was I?"

"Don't make me try pinching, to quicken your memory, sir!"

"All right; I'll not. And so—well, I bamboozled Kenmuir into riding clean over to the Pea-vine, after a man who was miles away in another direction. My old plug was pretty well tired, and I reckoned it'd save a powerful sight of hard feelings in the end, if I could only get this far, in time to drop a word of warning to—well, it's best to leave out names, I reckon."

That was an awkward point to touch upon, and Bantam Bob fully realized as much, as he saw that dull purple flush mounting toward the temples of the rancher.

"To do *that*, then, I wanted something faster than my old plug, or my own hoofs. I played a bit of mischief with the riding rigging of the gang, then borrowed a white horse—"

"Snow-squall! Didn't I say he's a cussed hoss-thief?" spluttered Billy Jacks, eager to clinch one point of his argument, at least.

"Shut up! You've had your say. Look to him, Whitlow, please."

"I'll cram a bat in his trap, if he don't keep it shut," grimly replied the rancher who had the knave in charge.

"That's the ugliest point Billy can hope to make against me, gentlemen, all," frankly declared Bantam Bob, with a wry grimace which brought a smile to more than one face, until then stern and full of suspicion. "But—the ends justify the means, and I stole the white gelding as an honest man, not as a thief at all."

"I dropped down here, a stranger to everybody. Chance threw me in contact with Julius Payne, and I found him, outwardly at least, a perfect gentleman. He treated me pure white, and so— Well, I'm not ashamed of it, although you may bel I did my level best to get him word in time of what was in the wind!"

"To do that the more surely, I borrowed the white nag, after crippling the sheriff's outfit as much as I could without crippling the dumb beasts. They came mighty nigh catching me, too!"

"Billy, yonder, emptied both of his guns at us, and never touched a hair! If I was as rattlesnaky as he's shown himself, gentlemen, I'd ask you to lynch him for—not so much for cracking at me, but for disgracing your range by missing such a big target, twelve times, hand-running!"

This, too, brought smiles and one or two short laughs, which was precisely what the Beauty from Butte was playing for. He knew that so long as a man feels equal to a smile, he'll never "tail-on" to a rope, with the other end about a human throat.

Billy Jacks was keen enough to see this point, and once more he broke in, savagely crying forth:

"How could I shoot cluss 'nough to hit a runt like him, 'bout reskin' the boss, too bad? An' it the second-best critter the boss ever owned! An' him—"

"The boss you sold out to Bulldog John Kenmuir and his bloodhounds: don't forget to stick that plain fact in, Billy," audaciously interrupted Bantam Bob, quick to see and score a point when the chance offered itself. "When I get tony enough to run a ranch, I hope I'll meet up with a whole regiment of just such faithful lads as you have shown yourself this night: and that's a lie to match some of yours, Billy!"

Once more Dexter Marshall interfered. Time was passing, and each minute cut to waste was just so much rope given the dastardly raiders.

True, little could be done toward pursuing the abductors until the dawning of the now not distant day, unless something of a clew could be extracted from this odd-looking stranger.

"You're in a hurry, sir," admitted Robert, with a meek bow, "and I'm not wondering at that. The main trouble is that whenever I let it get to going, my clapper clean runs away with

me, try how I may to hold it down to plain and level trotting. And so—steady, me!"

"Well, as I was saying, I took the chances, and took the white horse with them. I knew he was a good 'un to go, and I reckoned it's master wouldn't kick when he knew just why I did the borrowing act. And so I headed for this place right smart!"

"If I'd been content to take the regular trail, with which I had grown acquainted, maybe all would have panned out as I calculated it, but I was in a mortal burry, and so I made the same mistake many a wiser man has made before me: I took a short cut, instead of the long way 'round. And right there's where I came to grief, you see!"

"I hit the river all right enough, but the ford wasn't where I thought it ought to be, and I was in too big a hurry to get out a regular search-warrant for it. And so—well, I got mighty wet, my borrowed horse got mired in a quicksand, and there I was!"

"An' thar he is, gents, lyin' to kiver up stealin' a good hoss!" the malignant cowboy once more cut in, fancying he saw a chance to make a telling point. "Pinch him, boss, an' I wouldn't wonder ef ye was to find him out a cussed rustler!"

"Meaning that I've hidden the gelding, I reckon, Billy?"

"Don't it look like it, all o' you—say?"

"Looks don't always speak the truth, Billy, any more than you do. Still, I'll say this much: I can prove that I was dragged out of the quicksands, by the lasso of one who heard my yells for help. You see, gentlemen, I swim equal to a stone, and not one whit better. So—well I yelped for help until my throat was raw, and it didn't get to me any too soon, either!"

"Who came to your assistance, then?"

For almost the first time since being put on trial, Bantam Bob visibly hesitated, doubtless recalling the "law" to which his rescuer was so fond of referring. And once again Billy Jacks fancied he saw an opening which he ought to improve, which he did by crying out:

"He's stealin' time fer to hatch up a better lie, boss!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE BEAUTY IN BONDS.

DEXTER MARSHALL turned sharply upon the persistent fellow, his big hand clinched as he sternly ordered:

"Serve him out, Whitlow! He's had ample warning, and if his foul tongue is let wag, there'll be killing going on here! Clap a stopper on him, men!"

Owing to his great sufferings and trials, the owner of the Spectacle Ranch was looked upon as a leader by nearly all present, while there was but little love felt for the cowboy since his dastardly attempt upon the life of a bound enemy.

Despite his fierce struggles, curses, then pleadings, Billy Jacks was bound, hand and foot.

The Bantam watched this proceeding with a bland smile, and when Dexter Marshall once more motioned him to finish his rather roundabout explanation, he gave his nimble tongue free rein once more.

Without giving names, he told how he had been rescued from the grip of the quicksands, then told how he made all haste to warn Julius Payne of impending peril.

"I'd lost too much time for that," he continued, "for just as I came in sight, Kenmuir was entering the house. I laid low, taking notes, until I heard enough to be pretty sure there was a rescue intended by a gang of the outsiders. I took my chances, and joined them, going to what they spoke of as the Upper Ford. There they lay in waiting until Kenmuir and his posse came that way, with Billy Jacks guiding them."

"I'm dead sure of so much, gentlemen," he said, earnestly, as more than one ejaculation of surprise came to his ears. "And I'm just as sure of still more: that Billy Jacks pulled a gun at the crossing, and knocked Kenmuir cold!"

"He lies, cuss him!" fairly howled the cowboy, in an ecstasy of rage.

"You shut, Billy!" sternly cried Whitlow, tearing up a bunch of grass and crowding it between his jaws. "Go on with the music, there: my fog-born's plugged up!"

That was not so easy, so far as Bantam Bob was concerned. This entirely unexpected information threw the crowd into great excitement, and several minutes elapsed before the Beauty could resume his recital with any chance of being heard.

He told how, himself an idle witness, the sheriff and his posse came to grief, truthfully adding that he could not say precisely what became of Julius Payne in the end.

"All I know is just this: Billy Jacks knocked Kenmuir out of the saddle and into the drink, then rode clear of the ford with Payne. The last was still bound, as he had been from the first, or ironed, rather. And in the confusion I failed to take note just where they went, or what Billy did with his prize. Maybe he can tell you better!"

"You swear to this?" harshly demanded Mar-

shall, on whom the information was producing a startling effect.

"By word and grip, brother," came the quick response. "Shall I go on and tell you the rest of it, gentlemen?"

"Yes. Tell it all. If truth, we ought to know it. If lies, you'll have just so much more to answer for, when final settlement comes," the ranch-owner said, with forced calmness.

"Well, I'm not so sure whether to be proud or ashamed of what followed," hesitated Bantam Bob, with a rueful shrug of his shoulders, since his hands were unable to do their duty. "But truth goes, even if I've got to pay a bigger penalty!"

"The gang took the sheriff and his men away from the ford, out to a clump of trees, and as they 'peared to have forgotten all about me, I jogged after 'em on foot-back. I came up, just as they were talking rope: one fellow had the noose all ready for use, too!"

"Now, mind you, gentlemen, I've mighty scant love for a sheriff, or any of that sort, but—well, I couldn't stomach to stand idly by and see four stout fellows strung up, just for doing what the law commanded them to. And so—I waded in my whole depth, and talked the hide off my tongue trying to save 'em that bad a dose."

Bantam Bob paused, as though expecting an outburst of some description, but none such came. The men about him interchanged looks, but were silent; ominously so, it appeared to the Beauty.

Still, he felt that his best chance for escaping the toils lay in steering as close to the line of truth as he dared, and eager to get the trial over, he hastily resumed his account:

"I reckon I did some good, although Bull-dog John wouldn't admit as much, later on. Anyway, the hanging was given over, and they painted the lot black, to the waist! They bound 'em to their nags, hitched all four horses by the bits, then set 'em off in a stampede."

"It looked mighty foolish on my part, but I felt as though I ought to be doing something, so I struck out, unseen by the gang, after the black-whites, and stuck to it until I caught 'em up, thanks to their nags slowing down, of course. And then I did something which I'm not sure whether I ought to be glad or sorry for gentlemen."

"Go on; what did you do?"

"Well, you see I looked at it something like this," hesitatingly added the Beauty, with a grin which was plainly forced. "I reckoned it'd be a tolerably fair thing, you see; sort o' striking a balance, you understand? And so, making the deputies promise that they'd pull foot for where they came from, without lingering by the way for other mischief, I cut one of them free, then left him my knife, to do as he liked about his mates. Bull-dog Johnny wouldn't promise, argue as I might."

"Well, that's a full confession, gentlemen," he added, with a long breath and a keen glance around. "I reckon what I did, ought to come mighty nigh forming a stand-off. If I angered Kenmuir's friends and Payne's enemies by tricking the sheriff, by saving his neck from the noose, and giving him the means of getting free, I surely ought to have pleased his friends, just as much!"

"To wind up, I left them, and picked up foot for this place, meaning to report just what I'd seen and done. I was on my way when I caught sight of a glow, and knew fresh mischief was brewing. I ran my very best for the rest of the way, but when I came in sight, I saw Billy Jacks and the others at work."

"Seeing so few about, I ran into the house, and there I found Mrs. Marshall, insensible, with ladies waiting on her. I did all I knew how for the poor lady, then came out, to ask what had happened, and where the rest of you were. Billy Jacks roped me, and if you hadn't come up just as you did, I do reckon I'd be half-way up a tree, long ago!"

Bantam Bob brought his long account of himself and doings to a close, then, with inward uneasiness, but outward calm, watched and waited for the verdict.

He had given a fairly accurate narrative of facts, but he knew that he had kept back information which was sure to be asked for; and he was right.

"Who set you free from the quicksands? Who were of the party at the ford, besides Billy Jacks?"

"A stranger did the first, and I really couldn't swear to any of those at the ford," the Beauty assured. "Even if I knew them all by sight—and I'm a stranger in these parts, gentlemen—I'd have to say the same thing. I couldn't betray them, even to save my own self; now, could I?"

At this half-defiant, half-coaxing answer, tongues broke bounds, and for a brief space the discussion was hot and dangerous.

It was difficult for even one with so much at stake, to fairly keep score, so confused were the arguments, the threats, the stern denunciations, which came forth in a jumble.

Some were in favor of putting the two men to harsher questioning, forcing them to betray the whole truth under penalty of death by the rope.

A few favored Billy Jacks, and fiercely denounced Bantam Bob as a treacherous cur, for whom plain hanging was all too mild a punishment; while another few took the side of the little fellow, declaring that he had acted all for the best, under exceptional circumstances. But the majority seemed in favor of treating both men alike, and forcing each one to confess everything they knew concerning that night's work.

The one most deeply interested, Dexter Marshall, seemed at a loss just what view to take of the matter, and listened in turn to the different arguments brought forward. But when some of the hot-heads actually produced ropes with which to string up the prisoners, in hopes of forcing a full and free confession before death claimed them as its victims, he flung aside the unusual lethargy which had crept over him for the time being, sternly calling a halt.

"No lynching, friends! That can't bring back my little girl, nor help her poor mother. There's trickery out, I know, but—"

"I've told you the solid truth, gentlemen, as far as I can," the Bantam broke in, "and I'll kiss the Bible on every word I said in regard to Billy Jacks. Now, I'm not asking to be set free, for I'm willing to stand by my record, when you've got time to give it a fair and a square overhauling; but I do kick against lynching!"

"Take us both, Billy and me, and put us where we can't break out until you're ready to free or to hang. Then look up your points, and if I've done any one thing to merit death, I'll never kick a kick! I ask you to do this much, and I ask it as a man and a brother."

Just at that juncture the doctor came from the house, reporting that Mrs. Marshall had regained her consciousness, and wished to see her husband.

Bidding Whitlow guard both prisoners until he could return, Marshall hurried into the house, hoping to learn something definite from the injured woman concerning the abduction of their daughter.

He was absent for some little time, and when he again came forth, there were marks as of tears recently shed upon his cheeks.

"I've learned something, but not much to the point," he said, in explanation, as eager glances turned his way. "Come, friends, it's growing light, and we've got to hunt for sign."

"And these fellows?" asked Whitlow.

"Where'll we stow them?"

"I'll show you," leading the way in person.

Bantam Bob and Billy Jacks were taken into the house, to a wing where they would be safe, so long as kept in bonds. Leaving Whitlow to look after the cowboy, Marshall paid more attention to the Beauty, possibly in answer to that mystical word which had once before stood the little stranger in such good stead.

Possibly, too, that was the reason why the Bantam was confined apart from Jacks, and why Dexter Marshall took the trouble to grasp the hand which was powerless just then to offer itself. Be that as it may, Bob hurriedly whispered:

"Come to me, in secret, brother! I ask it, by word and by grip!"

Without answer, Marshall went away, and as the door closed behind him, the Beauty in bonds muttered, uneasily:

"Will it work? I'm betwixt the devil and the deep sea! How'll it end?"

CHAPTER XXV.

POLLY HUCKS DECLARES HERSELF.

A hollow sound of rapping caused Edith Marshall to partly rise from the rude bed on which she was lying at the time, a startled exclamation that was half hope, half dread, coming from her lips as she looked toward the closed door.

Her surroundings were dimly visible by the feeble rays of the lamp which was attached to the wall, high enough up to be out of her control, hampered as her movements necessarily must be.

There was little in those surroundings to give comfort to body or to mind, particularly those of one who had good reason to anticipate anything rather than generous or thoughtful treatment.

The room itself was barely furnished; the low bedstead of rough, unstained or painted wood, a chair with broken back, another which was merely a stool, since all semblance of a back had vanished. Besides these, a wooden bucket of water rested upon a block of wood.

This comprised everything that could possibly come under the heading of furniture, and both floor and walls were bare.

Before Edith could collect herself sufficiently to answer that signal in any other manner, the door swung open, to give admittance to a tall shape, which, once seen, could hardly be forgotten, or mistaken for that of another person.

Polly Hucks seemed even taller, now that she wore the garb appropriate to her sex, than she had while under the admiring gaze of Bantam Bob, whom she had rescued from a watery grave.

Uncertain though the light was, it revealed a face of far more than ordinary beauty. Each

feature was perfect in itself, clear-cut without being cold, regular without lack of life and variety.

The only fault which could possibly be found with that face and head, from a sculptor's point of view, was that of being too small to perfectly match that tall Juno-like figure.

The wealth of raven-black hair was carelessly knotted at the back of the small skull. Her eyes, large as those of a fawn, were a strange combination of fire and moisture, of fierce pride and melting pity, one minute attracting, the next repelling.

Her lips were full, red, moist, curved like Cupid's bow, yet her mouth was small and seemingly innocent as that of a babe.

All this Edith Marshall took in at a single glance, although she herself was only conscious of the glad feeling: a woman, hence one to whom I can plead!

And plead she did, passionately, tearfully, each in turn; but Polly Hucks stood unmoved through all, like some ancient statue, disguised in modern clothing.

Not until Edith ceased, breathless through powerful emotion, did her captor utter a word in her turn.

"What!" she ejaculated, in mock amazement. "Damp and reddened eyes? Tears, on this, the one night of a lifetime? Weeping on your bridal eve, my proud beauty? Shame to the gallant bridegroom! That he should permit such a profanation! Or—did he cause these tears, poor girl?"

Unless all signs lied, there was bitter jealousy underlying those taunts, but Edith paid no attention, just then. She had thoughts for but one; her lover, almost husband.

"Where is he? Why don't he come back to—tell me, I beg, if you are really a woman like myself! Where is he—my Julius?"

"Your Julius? You lie, girl! He never was, never can, never shall be your Julius! Never while I draw the breath of life shall any other woman—Oh!"

Her clinched and fiercely shaking hand flew open, then her fingers came back to her own throat. She appeared to be choking for the time being, and it was not until Edith gave a low, frightened cry of mingled pity and fright, that Polly Hucks rallied.

She forced a laugh, but it gave Edith a chill to hear it, even while her eyes told her the woman was softened by her evident pity.

"Did I frighten you, poor thing?" asked Polly, smoothing back her glorious hair with both hands, then drawing the stool nearer the bed on the side of which the rancher's daughter was sitting. "Am I so hideous, then? Yet there was a time when he—when people used to tell me I was an angel! But that was when I was happy—ah, so happy!"

She seemed greatly softened by those thoughts, and her queenly figure was shaken by sobs as her proud head bowed, her face losing itself in her joined palms.

Edith, too, was strongly affected, but what were this strange woman's unknown sorrows to her grief and wretchedness? And once again did she beg for help, for pity, for liberty.

The result was hardly what she expected, and certainly not what she hoped for. Polly Hucks lifted her head, her eyes glowing so hotly as to scorch up the tears which might otherwise have dimmed them.

"So that you may flee back to his arms, Edith Marshall? Can you ask me that? Can you even dream for a moment that I would grant you such a favor, after—"

She broke off, abruptly. She leaned forward, catching that once rosy, yet now pale and sorrow-marked face between her hands, holding it steady while her glittering eyes scanned it closely. Then, drawing a long breath, she fell back to her former position, speaking slowly:

"Is it true, child? Do you love him so fervently, then?"

A brief flush visited Edith's face, but as it faded away, she made answer, bravely, honestly:

"Love him? Love Julius? Yes, I love him better than life, better than all the world else!"

"Even though he is a criminal, child?"

Edith shrunk away, as though dealt a cruel blow, but as quickly she rallied, a ring of proud indignation in her tones:

"That is a lie, even though you dare but hint it! Criminal? Julius—my Julius? I'll never believe such a thing, until he makes the confession with his own lips!"

A spasm as of pain passed over that strangely beautiful face, then altered to a laugh, forced and unnatural, full of bitterness that seemed personal, rather than direct against the captive.

"From his own lips, you say, Miss Marshall? Well, why not? Stranger things than that have happened in the past, and may in the future. His own lips, you say? Well, if that confession should come to your ears, in just that fashion, what then? Would you believe, or would you still willfully blind yourself to his guilt?"

Something in her tone, even more than the words she uttered, gave Edith a chill akin to terror. And yet—it could not be true! He was no villain, no murderer!

"What! no answer ready?" persisted Polly Hucks, her red lips curling back far enough to

give a glimpse of her small, milk-white teeth for an instant.

"I don't—what can you mean, woman?" faltered Edith, hardly aware what words passed her lips.

Another change came over her captor. That fierce, almost hysterical scorn gave place to a touch of regret, if not of remorse. Those great eyes softened in the light, and that face grew more beautiful, because it seemed more womanly.

"Poor child! What is my meaning, you ask? I thought it would be so easy to tell you all! To tear the veil from before your eyes, and give you a full view of the bitter black truth! Now—I begin to think you have been far more sinned against than sinning! Begin!" with a trace of fierceness coming back to her really musical voice. "Not just that, for I thought it before. If not, you hardly would have lived until now!"

Edith Marshall was far from being a physical coward, under ordinary circumstances, but she had suffered severely that night, and was in poor condition for making a further fight against misfortune.

She shrunk away from that beautiful yet terrifying face, and vainly tried to wrench her hands free from their bonds. She felt in peril of her life, and yet—was it so?

After all, this was a woman, like herself, and one with a face so lovely and lovable in itself, surely could not be all evil!

"Who are you, and by what right have you treated me so vilely?" she asked, rallying her courage with a desperate effort.

"Who am I?" came the echo, but with a touch of sorrow in its bitterness. "Once I was a happy bride, like you, only a few short hours since! Once I was in a fool's heaven, loving and beloved, as I fondly fancied! As I was, for that was true—then!"

"Now—I came here, sworn to bitter vengeance, because I thought an evil-hearted woman was deliberately working me harm. I came here, sworn to punish her, though so doing might eternally damn my soul! And you are that very woman, Edith Marshall!"

The poor girl's blood chilled anew at that fierce outburst, but she bravely strove to conquer it. A glimpse of the black truth must have revealed itself to her, but she would not accept it as truth, while she held the power to fight back the worst.

"I can't believe—I don't understand you," she faltered, vainly striving to steady her tones. "If you mean to insinuate—"

"Stop, Miss Marshall!" interrupted Polly Hucks, with a swift gesture to back her speech. "This is no time for insinuations, from your side or from mine. I came here to show you the truth, and at whatever the cost to you or to me, the whole truth shall be yours!"

"I came here, from my far-off home, with little short of murder in my heart. I thought I would be fully justified in killing the woman who dared try to usurp the place I had filled for years, which I ought to be filling now, but which—I can't say it, even yet!"

"Well, I came here, as I started to say, and came almost too late! Your wedding eve was close at hand, and I had no time to soften the blow, after I learned that you were far more sinned against than sinning! So—I stole you away, simply in order to keep you from marrying another woman's husband!"

Until then, Edith had remained like one under a spell, but at that amazing announcement, the blood rushed back to her cheeks, and she cried out in sharp indignation:

"You lie, and I know it! Julius Payne is nothing to you, never was anything to you! Oh, why must I bear—"

"You?" cried Polly, in bitter scorn. "What have you to bear, in comparison with me? As for lying, Julius Payne, as you know the man you were about to wed, surely must have filled your ears with cunning lies, since you still cling to him as one worthy your adoration."

"He is! I'll never believe differently!" passionately cried the poor girl.

"So much the worse for you, foolish girl," sternly retorted Polly Hucks, as she rose to her feet and moved toward the door. "The man you know as Julius Payne is my lawful husband, and since less will not satisfy you, you shall hear him freely admit as much!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

OLD NATE BACKS UP HIS GAL.

WITH those passionate words, Polly Hucks left the room, closing and locking the door behind her.

Edith Marshall sunk back upon the rude couch, burying her face in the coarse pillow, shivering from top to toe with mingled grief, fear and hot indignation.

She could not believe those terrible words, although uttered with such an appearance of fierce honesty. She loved Julius Payne as only a strong, healthy, yet womanly woman can love when she meets the man who claims her entire heart and soul.

To think of him as being falsely accused of

murder, was bad enough, in all conscience, but to hear him claimed by another woman as her legal husband, was even worse.

Of course 'twas all a lie, all a foul plot to destroy her happiness and peace of mind, his reputation among men. Of course there could be no grounds for such vile claims, and yet—that woman seemed to be so terribly in earnest, too!

Edith Marshall had received a terribly severe shock, which would have turned a less equally balanced brain, or laid its owner low on a bed of sickness which might easily prove her death-bed as well.

Neither of these things came to her, yet the blow left her in poor condition for battling against such heavy odds. And while honestly declaring her perfect faith in her lover, almost husband, the poor girl could not entirely banish those horrible doubts: what if that woman's words were founded on fact? What if, long ago, Julius had been trapped into a marriage with her, and having lost sight—having received false tidings of her death, perhaps—

"No! I'll not—I can't believe—even that much!"

How long that fight against black doubts and fears lasted, Edith Marshall never knew. She was still clinging to her belief, her faith in the man she idolized, when the click of key in lock startled her once again to a sitting posture upon the edge of the bed.

The door swung open, barely wide enough to admit a gaunt figure, then closed, to have the key as swiftly turned in its wards.

Edith gave a faint cry as she saw her mistake: this was the figure of a man, not that of the tall woman whom she expected.

"Don't ye take a skeer, pritty!" hastily spoke the intruder, the dim rays of the lamp revealing a coar-e, weather-beaten visage which Edith almost immediately recognized. "It's jest me, ma'am. Jest Ole Nate Hucks, come to—"

"Save me! Set me free! Take me home, and I'll—"

"Don't, fer I cain't—jest nat'ally cain't even begin fer to think that way, now!" hastily interrupted the old rascal, casting a look over his shoulder toward the closed door, as though in fear. "Ef I was to do ary sech thing, my gal'd kick up a row which—I jest cain't do it, honey, an' that's the solid truth, now!"

"Your girl?" echoed Edith, in surprise. "Is that terrible woman—"

"Waal, I don't know 'bout the turrible, but Polly is my gal, shore enough," a bit more sharply interposed Old Nate. "An' she's jest as good an' white a little gal as ever toted wood an' water, now I'm tellin' ye that fer a solid fact, ma'am! Not that I want to be onerlite to a lady, but—Waal, Polly is my own gal, an' I'm in juty boun' fer to stan' up fer her, ag'inst the hull world, ef it comes to that!"

Edith's brain was working rapidly, and she began to see more clearly what had happened. Her courage began coming back, too, and in tones so clear and steady as to make Old Nate open his eyes widely, she said:

"I know you, now! Your name is Hucks, and you live at the old house which used to be a station, when the stage-line ran through this part of the State."

"Waal, I never said I wasn't, as I knows on," admitted Hucks, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, uneasily.

"And you were one of those who carried me away from home! You—oh, sir!" in sudden anxiety as that event came back more clearly. "I saw my poor mother fall as though—You didn't—She lives?"

"Well an' hearty as ef nothin' hedn't happened a-tall," hastily declared Old Nate, looking as though he less than ever relished the position which had, in a measure, been forced upon him. "But I didn't come in hyar to talk over no sech foolishness as them, but to—"

"You surely will let me go, sir? You will set me free, and father will pay you more—"

"Now, quit!" testily interrupted the old fellow, with a gesture of impatience or of anger, it was difficult to say just which. "When a feller cain't, he jest cain't, ain't it? An' Polly—waal, what I've done was 'long o' her makin', an' ef you've got to fault ary one critter, she's the one to ketch the blamin'. An' yit—she's doin' of it all fer your own good, honey!"

Edith shrunk back, but only for an instant. There was a touch of pity in his tones, however, rudely shown, and in hopes of banishing those horrible, if false doubts, she imploringly spoke to Old Nate:

"Tell me she lied! Oh, sir, you know that her words could not possibly be true! You know that—she was never married?"

"I reckon she was, one time," slowly responded Old Nate, his leathery brows wrinkling as with angry remembrance. "Yes, I know she was, but I'm wishin' all over she never was, cuss him fer a dirty whelp!"

Edith gave a choking sob, then sunk back upon the bed. She told herself she could not, would not believe this, but—she tried in vain to make her words good!

Not that she blamed Julius Payne, or called him guilty of worse than misfortune. He surely had believed himself free to woo and to wed, else he would have fled from temptation like the

honorable man he certainly was. Yet, how could such a woman dare claim a man for her legal husband, unless she had ample proofs to back up that claim?

Old Nate acted much as his daughter had, a short time earlier. He drew the stool forward, and sat down upon it. He watched that shivering form for a brief space, then began, in low, almost gentle tones:

"To tell it all, honey, in a way so plain that you mought take in all the crooks an' turns, 'I take a long time, an' a turrible lot o' wind, an' so—to jump right in whar the water's deep!"

"Never you mind jest how I got in the mix, but I made a boggle of it, an' fu'st I knowed, I was one o' the gang you've heard tell of, as the Steer Buccaneers, though jest what that name means, gits 'way with my knowin'. Anyway, I was one o' the rustlin' gang which hes bin makin' matters an' things purty tol'able lively in these parts, the last two or a couple o' years."

"It stan's in reason that we, down in these parts, hed to hev a boss fer to keep us in order, like. He was subjec' to the bigger bosses, in course, but he was high-muck-a-muck o' all in this section. An' that boss was—waal, you've knowed him purty tol'able well by the name o' Julius Payne—wuss luck!"

Edith gave a gasping denial, not of the acquaintance, but of the criminal charge. She was too greatly shocked, too much weakened by all she had undergone of late, to make a bolder defense.

"Waal, what I'm tellin' ye, honey, kin all be proved, fit fer law," Old Nate quietly resumed. "I wouldn't 'a' mentioned it, in course, only I couldn't 'splain how all the rest come about, 'thout makin' ye onderstan' jest what a hold we hed on Payne, same's he hed a grip on me."

"Next comes my gal, Polly. I hedn't seen much o' her, sence her mammy died, ye want to keep in mind. I loved the gal too mighty much fer to keep her in sech tough places as I couldn't well keep out of my own self, an' so I kep' her to school, an' sich like, sendin' her pritty much all the money I could rake an' scrape up. An' so—waal, I hain't noways 'shamed to 'mit that Polly growed clean out o' my range."

"Not that the little gal ever went back on her pap, ye mind," Old Nate hastily added, as though jealous lest he be thought complaining. "She never did, bless her bones! An' them few times what I tuck a run 'way down yender fer to see my gal, Polly jest made all the world of her pap: she did, an' never a lie in ary bit of it, too!"

"Waal, time was when I couldn't git to her fer a right smart long stretch o' months, an' endurin' of that time, Polly writ to me as how she was merried, an' jest too happy fer to live—pritty nigh!"

"An' then—waal, time came when she hed to write 'nother way, to her old pap, an' then—never mind! Thar was a row, an' a partin', an' then I never knowed jest what hed become of Polly or her man."

"Tain't a easy story to tell ye, honey, but I've got to git through with it all the same. An' so, fetchin' it down to right away, Polly come out hyar to pay her ole pap a call, an' when we got to talkin' over a'fairs together, it all come out: how, under 'nother name, an' in 'nother State, the boss hed married my gal, Polly!"

"Not my—not Julius!" gasped poor Edith, trying to rally under that terrible blow, but with a sad lack of success. "It's false! I'll never believe it—never!"

"Waal, I really don't see how you kin help it, honey," seriously spoke Old Nate. "Facts is facts, an' we've sot out to prove 'em all to you, afore we call it quits. An' so—let me git the rest over with."

"The fu'st thing we 'lowed to do, was to kill ye both. That sounds purty tough, honey, but when ye come to think how we'd both bin fooled by the boss—never mind: we come to 'nother way out o' the timber."

"Fer all he'd done her sech nasty dirt, Polly couldn't jest clean hate nur deespise her man, an' so we 'lowed the best way fer us would be to show him up in his true colors, which'd shorely make it too turrible hot in these parts fer him to stick it out. An' ef we could eyther shame or skeer him off this range, whar you hed him foul, Polly 'lowed melbe she mought fetch him back to his own wife, like."

"Even knowin' her man was tryin' to rope 'nother woman, it come harder'n pullin' back teeth fer to git a hold on him, out o' Polly. But I fetched it, in the end, an' then I knew what hed tuck her man 'way from her, in sech a rush: beca'se he'd killed a feller who he crazily reckoned was stealin' Polly 'way from him—dug-gun him fer a wuss then blind fool!"

"Waal, that don't int'rust you, I don't reckon, so I'll mosey on a bit faster, to git through the sooner."

"I went an' hed a warrant swore out, 'long of that killin', you want to onderstand. I saw that it'd be 'long in what I reckoned would be a day 'fore the time sot fer the weddin' that wouldn't be no weddin' in the eye o' the law, 'long of Polly an' him, ye see."

"Waal, thar was a hitch or a slip, somewhar, an' 'stead of the warrant gittin' hyar a day ahead,

it come mighty nigh not gittin' hyar a-tall! An' then—waal, you hain't forget how the sher'f tuck the boss, I hardly reckon, so soon! But he didn't take him fur off; *that* wouldn't suit Polly, an' so—we jest lined on ahead, an' jumped into Kenmuir from kiver, takin' the boss 'way from him, too easy!"

Edith started up, with a gasping cry, suddenly strengthened, to cry:

"You rescued him? You set him free? Oh, where is he, now?"

"Right under this very ruff-tree, no less!" declared Old Nate.

CHAPTER XXVII.

EDITH PLAYS EAVESDROPPER.

FOR the span of a single breath Edith seemed literally stunned, unable to speak, to move, to do aught save stare dazedly into the face of the man who gave such an unexpected answer to her impulsive query.

Under the same roof-tree? Then—

A wild, half-choked cry burst forth, and only the swift clutch of Old Nate saved Edith from springing to the floor, to do—what?

"Go easy, honey!" the old fellow warned, one horny palm closing over her lips, to enforce a hearing for himself. "Ef I'm to do ye ary good, *this* hain't the way nur the how; yelpin' out wass'n a houn' pup on his fust trail! Cam ye down a bit, onless ye want me to go the way I come, an' leave ye fer to worry it out by yer lonesome!"

A more terrible threat could hardly have been devised than this, and in dread lest she be deserted, to die of suspense, Edith sought to give assurance that she would hold her emotions in check.

Old Nate appeared able to read her thoughts, for he certainly could not have interpreted that inarticulate murmur into words. He gently, if awkwardly, placed the agitated girl back on the couch, then held up a hand in warning as he hastened to add:

"It's jest gospel truth I'm slingin' at ye in chunks, honey, an' ef it all hain't proved up to ye, then it'll be beca'se you won't hev it that way, your own self. An' so—hold in, pritty, an' let me say it!"

"It looks like turrible tough medicine fer a sick man, but what milder could we do, yit make a sure cure? An' so, as I told ye, we laid out a trick that we reckoned must kill or cure! We done jest what I told ye, then fetched the boss over to this shebang, whar he'd hev to lay low at our say-so, yit mought easy skin out ef the houn's hit off his trail too quick.

"Next thing was to fetch *you* hyar, to make both you 'n the boss know fer a dead moral how clean the gittin' hitched was played out. An' *then*, when you'd got all two eyes wide open, we 'lowed to let ye go back to the Spectacle, safe an' sound as ye ever was. See?"

But Edith apparently was too greatly excited to follow that elaborate argument. She had thoughts but for one thing.

"Here? Under this roof? Julius—my Julius?"

"Right hyar, under this ruff, an' Julius plenty plain, honey, but ef my gal Polly was to ketch ye—stiddy, now girly, an' try to anwer me white," he urged, forcing her attention by pressing a hand upon her shoulder, his shaggy-browed eyes fairly glittering as they gazed into hers, as though trying to bring her brain into subjection to his own.

"Even ef ye can't see it that way, jist yit, both me'n my gal Polly is workin' fer your own good. An' I reckon Polly's mighty nigh gittin' tired waitin' fer me to fetch you 'round the right way, but—waal, ef I hain't old 'nough fer to act as I reckon's best, then when will I ever be?"

"Here? Oh, take me to him, if you are human!" huskily murmured the tortured maiden, unable to longer choke back that burning desire.

"Ef I take ye whar you kin hear and see him, honey, will ye do all the rest, jist as I tell ye?"

"Yes, all, anything, everything, jist so—oh, Julius!"

Old Nate gave a snort of mixed disgust and dismay, for he certainly had not calculated on such conduct as this. Of course there would be more or less excitement and agitation, but—well, this was all more, and no less!

"Good Lawd! An' time's a-passin', an' hyar she kicks, wuss'n ever! *Cain't* ye simmer, honey duck! Cain't ye choke 'er back, ontell later? Ef ye can't, then the cock's dead, an' no figit comes off!"

Edith could hardly be expected to interpret his words, yet she caught sufficient of his intent, to know that she must counterfeit the calmness she was unable to feel, or lose this chance of—what was it this strange man had promised her?

By a desperate effort the brave girl did smother her intense emotions for the minute, forcing herself to say, in fairly firm tones:

"I promise, sir. You said I might see Julius? Now—I'm strong, and calm—my nerves are like steel—see!"

"So you say, but—kin I pend onto ye, ma'am? Thar shain't come no whoopin', no bellerin', no kickin' up bighstrikes, nur sech fool' doin's? Cross yer heart on that, honey?"

"I promise—everything. Only let me see him, please."

"Mind ye, pritty birdy," coaxingly spoke Old Nate, plainly afraid to place full dependence upon that reckless pledge. "Even ef it *does* taste bitterer'n gall, an' ef what you come to see an' ketch onto with the ears o' ye, hurts wuss then a sulphur blister, back o' the bull o' it lays your own good, honey. An' so, hopin' you won't make it no harder on the old man then it jist *hes* to be, I'll tote ye—Stiddy, now!"

His bony yet powerful arm lifted Edith from the couch and placed her safely upon her feet. His arm still lent her support as they moved across the room to the door, and with his hand touching the key, Old Nate lingered long enough for one more warning:

"Mind ye, honey, this is a sort o' secret atwixt us, an' the boss don't so much as know ar'ythin' happened at the Spectacle, later'n his bein' ketched an' toted off. So—fer his sake, ef not fer yer own, honey, keep a mighty tight button, or *he'll* hev to suffer fer it!"

Edith tried to ask an explanation, but Old Nate touched her blanched lips with a rough finger, and the poor girl submitted to silence.

Unlocking the door, Hucks half-led, half-supported the maiden into an adjoining chamber, only a little less dark than the one they had just left.

That darkness, however, was owing to the care with which the one window was closely boarded up on the outside, for a tiny ray or two of bright daylight came sifting through the fine cracks between the boards, and Edith, for the first time realized that the sun of another day was shining, and that that eventful night had spent itself.

"Never a whimper, lest they'll hear ye, an' ketch a skeer, honey!" in low, guarded tones warned Old Nate, then lifting the girl in his arms and bearing her across the room, pausing close to a dark wall. "Now—open yer ears, pritty, an'—*stiddy, fer luck!*"

Even before Old Nate uttered those last words, Edith caught the indistinct murmur of a human voice, and now, as she fairly held her breath to listen more acutely, she recognized the voice of the strange woman who had dealt her such a heart-crushing blow, only a few minutes before.

"If cruel, what can be said concerning *your* actions, Fred?" were the first connected words Edith made out. "What less could I do? And you surely would not have me do more?"

Polly ceased, and another voice gave a low murmur. Edith could not catch so much as a single word, but her frame took to shivering as if under an ague chill, and Old Nate breathed a swift warning in her ear.

"Keerful, honey, ef ye don't want me to tote ye back!"

"Ayl more—much more!" came in clearer because fiercer tones, from beyond that frail partition. "What I swore, by heaven and by hell, to do, when pap first told me what was in the wind! I could have killed you both, jist as the preacher was pronouncin' the words that were to make you one—a lie! How could *that* be, when I, your honest, legal wife, had never died?"

"I thought you had, Polly, but—"

Edith heard no more of that excuse, for her senses seemed to reel, her brain throbbing as though her skull must split asunder.

It was true, then! He whom she had loved so entirely, was false! She recognized his voice, and he—he was admitting that woman's claim!

Old Nate clasped her waist tighter with his left arm, and held his other hand ready to close over her lips in case emotion should break forth in words or in shrieks.

"Stiddy, honey!" he hissed, in warning. "Lisen ef ye kin, but don't spile all by kickin' up a row 'fore ye git to know it all!"

Edith ceased shivering, and remained almost without motion, save for her hurried breathing. She leaned her head nearer that partition, as though eager to hear more.

When she did this, Polly was speaking again, and in tones of half-sad, half-fierce reproach.

"I wish 'twas no worse, Fred, but—how can I believe you? If you still love me, as you surely did in the days gone by—"

"Don't I tell you I do, Polly?"

"With your lips, yes, but not by your actions when you first knew I was near, and that I—"

"Well, even you must own up 'twas a mighty rocky deal you gave me, Polly," with a touch of resentment in his tones. "To swear out a warrant for murder! To set a devil like Bull-dog John Kenmuir on my track, and let him drop down, without even a word or a sign of warning! *That* surely was enough to put a wire-edge on a temper less hot than mine, old girl!"

"It was kill or cure, Fred, and I feared to give you even a chance to foolish me again," said Polly, her tones growing a bit less metallic than before. "Would you have been glad to see me, had I come forward, to claim my rights?"

There was no immediate reply. Evidently her husband found that a hard question to answer, off-hand.

Polly gave a short, harsh laugh, and her voice was full of bitterness as she added:

"See how easy it is to tangle you up, Fred?"

If your heart was *all* mine, as you so often swore in those good old days, how different! You couldn't stumble over the truth, Fred, like this! And so—now listen, yet a little longer, husband.

"I took time to see this girl, and when I had seen her, I was afraid to risk too much. If she had been less lovable, maybe I might have acted as you said I ought; maybe—"

"If you only *had!*" harshly interrupted the other, with a vicious curse. "I'd have been jist as glad to see *you*, and we could have turned the trick and raked in the ducats, without all this risk! Now—that devil of a Kenmuir 'll surely come back, better fixed for fighting, and I'll have to skip out, or pull bemp!"

"I know all that, Fred," coolly replied Polly, a touch of stern triumph in her tones the while. "I argued jist that way. I'd make this section too hot for your living, then you'd be all the more ready to go far away with me, your lawful wife."

"But—there's old Marshall's rocks, Polly!"

"And old Marshall's daughter, Fred!" fiercely mocked the woman. "If I really thought—look me squarely in the eyes, man, and answer me this: do you still love that girl? Is she dearer to your heart than I, your lawful wife? No lies, Fred, but the honest truth, if it's in you!"

"No, she's *not*, she never *was* that dear, Polly," came the quick response, every word falling like a heavy blow upon brain and heart of poor Edith as she stood breathlessly listening. "I never loved Edith, but she had money, and—"

His cruel speech was cut short by a wild, piercing scream.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

BROUGHT FACE TO FACE.

WITH a vicious oath, Old Nate caught Edith up in his arms, but her scream had come too suddenly for him to check, and as he sprung with her across that darkened chamber, he could hear harsh ejaculations and the sounds as of a desperate struggle going on in the adjoining room.

Edith did not actually faint, although her brain was in too great confusion for her to realize just what was taking place, and it was not until she was again in her prison-chamber, and lying on that rude bed, that her senses began to answer her needs.

Old Nate, muttering curses of vexation, was standing in front of the bed, facing the door, which just then swung violently open, to admit the tall figure of Polly Hucks.

"Stiddy, gal!" cried the old man, with a half-savage gesture, but cowering visibly before that pale, stern face ominously and those blazing eyes. "I couldn't help it, I tell 'ee! I jist couldn't, now!"

Without a word in answer to him, Polly strode forward, brushing him aside as though but a child in her path, then pausing, her arms folded closely over her swelling bosom, gazing fixedly down upon the poor girl who had received such a cruel blow.

Edith opened her eyes, then rose to a sitting posture as she recognized that beautiful face. And Polly slowly, coldly spoke:

"Well, are you satisfied, Miss Marshall? You heard, if you did not see. I knew you were listening, and that your eyes might be fairly opened to the bitter truth, I forced him—I led him on to say all."

"No, not truth!" panted Edith, her strength returning after a marvelous fashion. "I heard—*lies, not the truth!* It's all false, all a shamefully vile trick, to make me believe—*never*, I tell you! That was not *my* Julius! Some miserable tool of yours stole his voice, the better to carry out your atrocious schemes, but—all lies, I say!"

A cold, yet almost sad smile crept into Polly's face as she stood motionless, listening to this wild outburst. She made no attempt to cut it short, but let Edith exhaust herself by her own intense passion.

Then, when the girl ceased, breathless, Polly Hucks spoke gravely:

"Your lips say so, but your heart and reason tell a different story, Miss Marshall. You *do* believe—how can you avoid it?"

"Because I know he is not such a vile being! Because he did, he *does* love me far more than—Oh, how can you be so cruel?"

"To save you from a far worse punishment, Miss Marshall. I'll admit that I'm disappointed at your unbelief, after all I've suffered to open your eyes. For I have suffered, far more and far keener than such a milk-and-waterish chit as you can even dream of suffering! And now—pap?"

With a sign to Old Nate, Polly drew back nearer the door, speaking a few words to her father in guarded tones. The old man flung out one hand in an impatient gesture, then said, in louder tones:

"Why not? What hurt kin it do, now?"

"Maybe none, and yet—"

"What's seein' wuss then hearin'? An' sence we've got to rack out o' this, anyway, why—I say, finish it up, right now!"

Polly hesitated a bit longer, a dark and troubled frown marring her beautiful face. But then, as though casting all fears to the winds,

she once more drew near Edith, speaking coldly, almost harshly:

"Answer me frankly, honestly, Miss Marshall: did you not recognize the voice of the man you know as Julius Payne, in yonder?"

"It sounded like his voice, but I know it was not!"

"How, know?"

"Because Julius is true and honest as your vile tool is false! Because I know my Julius would die before uttering such black lies!"

Polly gave a fierce gesture, her hot temper apparently on the point of giving them all fresh trouble. But she forced it back, and coldly spoke again:

"You are making it tenfold harder than I thought for, girl, but as I've set in to save you, even against your foolish wishes, I'll carry it through to the end, no matter how bitter the trial. Now—if I plainly prove to you that the man you heard me talking to in yonder, only a few minutes ago, was and really is the Julius Payne you were to have married last evening, will you believe? Will you accept the evidence of your own eyes, then?"

Edith shrank back, shivering. Surely this woman would not make such an offer, if she was not perfectly confident she was in the right? And yet—it could not be so!

"You will take me to him? You will give me light, to see? You will not put any further barrier between us?" she asked, feverishly.

Polly smiled, even gave a low, brief laugh; but neither one nor the other held aught of mirth; both were bitter, both were even fierce.

"No barrier between, say you, Miss Marshall? Ay! there will be one lawful barrier between you two, and ever must while I live. But I'll let you see your—the man you call lover, almost husband. I'll bring you face to face, for the last time in this life."

"Will it—reckon he won't bust up in a row, Polly?" ventured Old Nate, uneasily.

"Hardly, pap! Didn't you hear the racket, then?"

"Yes, but—"

"That's enough, pap! I couldn't take any longer chances, and so I had the boys— Never mind, I tell you, man! Fetch her, since nothing less will satisfy her. I'm afraid to touch her—yet!"

"Come, honey," muttered Old Nate, again lending Edith the support she really needed, in her great excitement. "An' don't make it come any tougher'n you kin help, fer Polly— Waal, the pore gal hes hed it rubbed in mighty sore, ye want to know, pritty!"

As before, Old Nate led Edith from her prison chamber, but instead of crossing over to the partition, he turned to the right, opened a door through which Polly had vanished, then stopped short as Edith gave a gasping cry.

They were in a chamber where light came in through two windows, obstructed only by the dusty, cobweb-festooned panes of glass.

By that light Edith saw the tall figure of Polly Hucks, standing with folded arms, and lying on a blanket not far from her feet, was a man, bound and gagged!

"Fetch Miss Marshall closer, pap," coldly spoke Polly, stepping to one side, thus giving a fairer view of that helpless man. "Let her see for herself what her mad unbelief has wrought!"

Old Nate obeyed, and as Edith clearly recognized the face of Julius Payne, he held her firmly, despite her struggles to break away and clasp in her arms the man she loved so passionately.

In stony silence Polly Hucks waited through all the poor girl's wild cries and prayers and ravings. That bound and gagged figure, too, was strongly agitated, making desperate but vain efforts to burst his bonds.

"You see, Miss Marshall," spoke the woman, as Edith hung exhausted in the arms of Old Nate. "This much is your work. When he heard and recognized your cry, but now, his crazy fancy caused him to curse even me, his lawful wife! And so—I was ready for even that, you see!"

A gesture toward those bonds pointed her meaning.

"Now, just a few words by way of finish, Miss Marshall. This man is my husband, and I love him beyond the power of words to tell, cruel, wicked, sinful though other people may term him.

"All that has taken place since you first stood by his side before the holy man, last evening, has been my work. All this exposure comes through my planning. Why have I branded my own husband, do you wonder?"

"Wait, please! When the proper time comes you shall be set at liberty, without hurt or harm. You can tell all you have experienced, all you have seen and heard, and that means—this part of the country will be made far too dangerous for Julius Payne, as you know my husband, to remain here, or ever think of coming back, once he has escaped.

"His name will be branded, every man's hand will be lifted against him, he will be cursed as all that is vile; but what care I for that? Were his crimes a thousandfold as many

and black, still, I love him above all the world else!

"Before you can tell your story, we will be far away from here, and I have laid our plans so perfectly that pursuit will be useless. When away from you, he'll turn to me, his wife, his lover, his slave! For then I will be all of these—to my husband!"

"Now, are you satisfied that this is indeed the man you loved as Julius Payne? Take one more look—so!"

That look was granted the poor girl, then Old Nate lifted her bodily in his arms, bearing her hastily back to the chamber to which she had first been carried. And placing her upon the bed, he muttered:

"I kin feel fer ye, honey, but it hed to be did—jest hed to, ye understand? Polly couldn't let her man hitch onto nother woman, an' so she— Waal, it hed to be done, pritty!"

"Now, try to chirk up a bit, fer 'twon't be long afore you're safe back home ag'in, whar I'm hopin' better luck'll ketch ye, honey!"

As though fearing to linger longer, Old Nate left the chamber, turning the key in the lock, then shambling down the rickety flight of stairs, to join Polly in a room on the ground floor.

But before either of them could speak, there came a sharp rap at the front door, which immediately swung open, to admit a breathless man.

"Found you, didn't I? Well, jig's up, I do reckon, pardners!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE BANTAM TURNS BULLDOZER.

POSSIBLY the Beauty from Butte relied on the fact of their being members of the same secret society to win him freedom at the hands of Dexter Marshall, just as the call for aid recognized in that order, hurried the ranch-owner to his assistance.

By word and by grip he had bidden Marshall come to him in secret, and a little later, that visit was paid.

Many words were spoken, and some explanations given, yet the result could hardly have been all that Bantam Bob expected; he was shifted to even less comfortable quarters, left in bonds, and under the especial care of an armed guard.

Mrs. Marshall was ill, the natural result of the cruel blows she had received, physically and mentally. The doctor commanded perfect quiet, and to the more certainly insure that, both of the prisoners were taken from the ranch-house, and stowed away in outbuildings.

"The better for lynching, I presume?" sneeringly observed the Beauty from Butte, as his transfer was made. "Well, reckon I'll be on hand when the time comes."

Still, that prospect did not hold terrors sufficient to cow the spirit or chain the tongue of the little fellow, and now, as his guard leaned back against a post, smoking his pipe in lazy comfort, yet ever on the alert against trouble from outside or in, Bantam Bob spoke:

"I say, pardner!"

"What's the use? Sayin' won't do ye no good, an'll only hender me from thinkin'," grunted the guard, lazily.

"But if I give you fresh food for thought?"

"Don't keer fer none. Got plenty o' my own make. Best shet peepers, an' go to sleep. Tain't so mighty many more chances you'll ever hev o' doin' that, fer to be throwin' this'ne over yer shoulder."

"Oh, come off! You're talking through your hat, man!" drawlingly retorted the prisoner, in tones of contempt.

"That's all right, if you think so. I'm not kickin'."

"But you can't really mean it, man! What have I done to pull hemp for, I'd like to know?"

"Mebbe you will, ef they take time to tell ye. Ef they don't—waal, 'twon't make much differ, I don't reckon, to you."

There was a brief silence, during which Bantam Bob gazed keenly at his guard, seemingly pondering over his thinly-veiled hints, or else shaping the attack which followed.

"I say, Dumphrey!"

"Whar'd you ketch my name so mighty pat, I'd like to know?" ejaculated the guard, straightening up and staring at his charge with more life and animation than he had previously betrayed.

"Didn't Marshall mention it, when I was shifted out here? No matter for that, and if I've hit the wrong name, I haven't the wrong man."

"I don't know what you're tryin' to git through ye, but I do know that I hain't boun' to set up as a mark fer ye to shoot off yer bazoo at; an' so—cork it up, critter!"

"After a minute, pardner," coaxingly adding: "Come, now, you don't really think the boys'll run me up a tree, just for—that?"

"Wish I was as sure o' gittin' rich!"

"Honest Injun, Dumphrey?"

"Oh, hush! You know that's the way it's jest boun' fer to end, so whar's the use in makin' me chaw more wind?" impatiently said the man on guard, evidently tired of that subject.

Bantam Bob gave a low, prolonged whistle, his big eyes staring at vacancy the while, his face a comical blending of doubt, fear and disgust.

Dumphrey gave a start at that sound, and leaned a little more forward, as though to aid his eyes in the scrutiny which followed.

"Up a tree, and no ladder! Yanked to heaven, as the reporters say! And you—I say, pardner!" turning those odd eyes fully upon his guard as he added: "We'd make a handsome couple, wouldn't we? Wonder which one of us the birds'd choose to build nests on, then?"

"I don't—shet up, durn ye!"

"And you—toe the mark, pardner!" his voice catching a hard, stern echo as he added: "If I pull hemp, Dan Dumphrey, you'll swing mighty close by, and after the very same fashion!"

"I don't—what?"

"Sure! I can't hold forth my hand, brother, but you can come over here and satisfy yourself that I'm all right."

Bantam Bob turned on one side, leaving his hands, which were still bound behind him, in fair view, his fingers wriggling, as though in further invitation.

Dumphrey sat staring, like one who could not yet believe the evidence offered by his own senses, but Bantam Bob was in no mood to wait the fellow's pleasure, and sternly added:

"Come! by word and by grip, brother!"

Laying aside his pipe with unsteady hands, the guard moved forward on his knees, and touched one of those bound hands. Despite their hampered condition, they were able to do the work set for them, and with a long, uneasy breath, Dumphrey moved back to his former position.

Bantam Bob rolled back, resuming his original position, those great eyes fixed steadily upon the blanched face of his guard.

"Sorry to upset you, pardner, but business is business, and part of yours is to help me with mine: cheating the rope!"

"I couldn't ef I would—how kin I?"

"By just up and doing of it, Danny, no less! You can if you will. What's more easy than just cutting away these infernal ropes, then telling me good-by, with good-luck in my journeys?"

"You're foolish, man! They'd lynch me fer that, too mighty quick!"

"Will they treat you any less harshly when they come to know you're one of the Steer—"

"Don't say it! Shet, cuss ye!" growled the guard, with a menacing gesture. "Ef they was to ketch—"

"There's never a bit of danger, pardner, unless you force it that way," quietly spoke Bantam Bob. "I've proven to you that I'm a member of the family, even as you are. Now—you know your sworn duty, and I call upon you, by word and by grip, to do your duty!"

"But—how kin I? It'd be shore death when they found it out, an' the laws don't say—"

"Steady, brother! The laws bind you to respond to a call for help from a brother in distress, no matter how much risk that answer will bring upon yourself. You are a member, and so am I. I give that call, and you refuse to respond. Now—what will be your lot, brother?"

Dumphrey gave a groan and an oath, curiously blended. He brushed a sleeve across his heated face, but seemingly could not find words in which to answer those significant questions.

"Answer, brother!" insisted Bantam Bob, after a brief pause. "If I call upon you for help, and you refuse to render it, what penalty—"

"Shet up, cuss ye!" growled Dumphrey, jerking forth a revolver and covering his charge, menacingly. "Shet up, or I'll kill ye!"

"And by so doing, turn every brother's hand against your life?" the Beauty coolly queried.

"Better run the risk of lynching for letting me slip through your fingers, pardner! You can lie out of that, but the other—"

"I could swar I never knowed ye was one of—an' I hed to shoot ye to keep ye from gittin' loose!" muttered the fellow, handling his gun like one playing with a terribly strong temptation.

"That lie couldn't begin to cover your action, brother, and you know it, well as I can tell you. Now—by word and by grip, I order you to turn me loose!"

"But—how kin I?"

"Easy enough, if you only think so. We're 'way off here, in the early morning. I reckon a good share of the neighbors are thinking more about grub, or a forty-winks, than they are about poor devils like us. So—what more easy than for a masked stranger to take you by surprise, and after overcoming you without an alarm, turning me free?"

"They'd never swaller it down—never!"

"So much the worse for your health, Dumphrey, for that's the very risk you've got to run, and right now. Come!" his voice growing harder, sterner. "By word and by grip, I demand that you turn me loose!"

For a brief space Bantam Bob's life hung as by a hair, and right well he knew it, too!

Dumphrey was tempted to shoot his charge, and take the risk of being punished for the kill—

ing provided he failed to excuse himself by hastily manufactured lies.

But then—his terrible oath!

"Obey, or you'll die, by rope or by knife," coldly warned the bound man. "I'll swear you are a Steer Buccaneer, if I am to be lynched. And then, if you escape the rope, bullet or steel will surely catch the one who proved false to his vows. So—turn me loose, brother!"

The ruffian was cowed by those cold, pitiless, fearless tones, and drawing his knife from its sheath, he severed the bonds which held the Beauty's hands helpless.

After that, the Bantam took possession of the weapon, and completed the work, at the same time clearly explaining how he counted on covering over his escape and the treachery of the man placed to guard him.

Worn by a wakeful night, Dan Dumphrey had dropped off into a doze, and only knew of trouble when a heavy muller was flung over his head and face. Strong hands deprived him of arms, then bound him, just as he was to be found, later.

"You never caught a square look at the man or men who turned the trick, pardner, so you can't describe them. All you can be dead sure of is, that one wore a mask; that I was set free, and you left in my place."

Using the same rope which had bound himself, Bantam Bob quickly tied his late guard, then shaped a gag and put it in place.

"You'll not suffer punishment, for there are too many brothers at hand for that," he said, consolingly, as he secured the pistols and cartridge-belt taken from Dumphrey. "Stick to the story I've lined out for you, and you'll come off, easy as pie-eating!"

A muffled groan came from the man thus encouraged, but Bantam Bob wasted no further time in trying to reassure him. He knew that he was in great danger, and that, should his escape be discovered by the outsiders, his life would hardly be worth purchase.

Only pausing for a wary glance around the premises, the Beauty from Butte stole cautiously out from the rude structure in which he had been confined, crouching low down as he glided rapidly away, heading for the nearest bit of cover.

He reached this without a sound to tell of his being seen, and with a long, full breath of relief, he proceeded more rapidly, soliloquizing by the way:

"Better than I dared hope for, but, there's more to come! Can I find the place? And if I find it, what sort of a reception will Old Nate and his Polly give a fellow of my size and dimensions?"

CHAPTER XXX.

THE BEAUTY GIVES WARNING.

A SIMULTANEOUS cry of half-angry surprise burst from father and daughter as they recognized that hasty intruder, but the Bantam flung up a hand in amity, panting:

"Flag o' truce, gentleman and lady! Let me—ketch my wind!"

He dropped limply into the nearest chair, removing his hat, the better to wipe his dripping forehead. To all seeming he had just reached the end of a long and killing race or flight.

Old Nate sprung across to the door, flashing a keen, apprehensive glance around, but without detecting aught to account for that abrupt entrance and hasty alarm.

"What's up, man?" sternly demanded Polly Hucks, one hand hidden in the folds of her black dress, her fingers gripping the butt of a revolver, the muzzle of which was surely, if secretly, covering the Beauty.

"The devil's up, or will be, mighty sudden!" declared Bob, with a catch in his breath, though he seemed to be rallying from his exhaustion right cleverly.

"What's that got to do with us? Come, stranger, either you've got us mixed up with some other party, or else you've been scared so badly that you've lost what few wits you ever owned. Now—which?"

"Nobody in sight yet, is there, daddy?" asked the Beauty, with an uneasy glance toward Old Nate, who was closing the door.

"Nary critter, as I kin see," was the gruff reply. "What bit ye so mighty bad, stranger?"

"I've been scared out of a full year's growth, and that's a fact!" ruefully declared the little fellow. "I've had a noose about my neck, and mighty willing hands tugging at the other end o' the rope! I've been threatened with toasting, and—"

"Come to the point, sir!" sharply interposed Polly, still ready to act if need be. "What has all this got to do with us? How can your personal peril excuse this rude intrusion?"

"Does it need any excuse for a man to bring you warning of great peril?" asked the Bantam, with a note of mingled surprise and irritation. "Don't I say the jig's up? Don't I tell you that old Marshall is red-hot and still a-heating, over his gal being stolen?"

"Has she—but what can that have to do with us?"

"I thought—oh, come off!" with a gesture of half-disgust, half-reproach. "You know I'm

one of the gang, and I know that—all right, if you will have it so, ma'am!"

"I checked you, sir, because you are taking entirely too much for granted. What have we to do with Dexter Marshall or his daughter? You surely can't think we have troubled her, further than being witnesses to her interrupted marriage?" and Polly's eyes flashed ominously.

Bob drew a long breath, as of relief. His anxious look vanished, and he spoke with more composure than he had as yet exhibited.

"Well, I'm mighty glad to hear that, ma'am. I did think you had a finger in the pudding, for the women who were at the Spectacle Ranch when the last raid was made, swore up and down that one of the abductors was a woman in masculine garments. And so—well, having seen you figuring in just such a rig-out, ma'am, only last night, I naturally thought that man-woman must be you."

"And so you came here, to do just what?"

"First, to warn you that trouble was brewing, of course. You two saved my life, when I'd about given over all hopes; and so—by word and by grip!"

Through all this, Old Nate had been sidgiting uneasily about, and now he spoke up querulously:

"Lee him tell, Polly! Even ef thar hain't no jest cause fer our gittin' skeered—oh, darn it all! Thar's more back then you've done fetched for'ard, critter, an' I jest knows it, too!"

Polly moved toward the window which looked out upon the open tract of ground in front of the Old Station, and after a keen glance her way the Beauty spoke again:

"There is so, pardner, and I'm mighty sorry to say it, too! For one thing—how far can you trust Billy Jacks?"

"Trust him? How?"

"As a brother, of course. If he was tight pinched, would he stand true to his vows, or would he squeal, to save his own neck?"

"Waal, I'd hate most mightily to hev my neck an' his tongue runnin' in couples," uneasily grunted the veteran, with a glance toward Polly, who made no sign, still gazing through the closed window. "But, you shorely don't mean fer to say— Out with it, dug-gun ye, critter!"

"Of course; that's just what I came all this long road for," was the placid response. "Well, whether you know it or not, there's been a powerful lot o' happenings at the Spectacle Ranch, since Bull-dog John took his man away, and I've had a bigger mix in it than I care to go through with again!"

"First, a fire was started, while all the men were off after a raiding outfit. Next, Miss Marshall was abducted, as I said before. Next, Billy Jacks tried to play even with me, by lending me a rope—right where I breathe, you understand!"

"Luckily for me, Marshall and his gang came back just in time to save my neck for the moment. The light of the fire had drawn them, you understand? And then—well, Billy swore that I must have set the fire going, or else that I had a finger in the kidnapping; shooting at poor me with both barrels, you see!"

"Cut it short, will you?" coldly cut in Polly Hucks.

"Short as I can, ma'am," bowed the Beauty, meekly. "Well, that made me sweat under the collar, and so I came back at Billy: told just what part he played on Kenmuir, and—"

"You dared to betray us, sir?"

"No, for my vows prevented, even if I had been inclined to such rank treachery," earnestly replied the little fellow. "I wouldn't give a name, save that of Billy Jacks, and he laid himself open to that retort by foully assailing me: you both know the laws, of course!"

"I wouldn't mention another name, although the gang tried to make me. I could have cleared myself by giving you two as witnesses to the truth of my tale, but—I buttoned up, tight!"

"So you say, at least?"

"Truthfully, as you can learn from any one of the family who was within sight and hearing, Miss Polly," gravely answered Bantam Bob. "Because I refused to give any names, I was held, on suspicion, placed in mighty tight-fitting bonds, and an armed guard placed over me."

"How come ye this fur, then?" asked Old Nate.

"Simply because the guard happened to be one who dared not refuse to obey the distress-call. Daniel Dumphrey was the man placed over me, and feeling pretty sure that you two knew all about the abduction of Miss Marshall, I felt that I must warn you of impending danger."

"I forced Dumphrey to change places with me, giving him a story to tell which would save him from punishment, then made all haste to this place."

"Did you see any critter gwine 'way, as you come?"

"No. I lost my way, and only caught sight of the house from the point, over yonder. Then I hurried here, and now—if Billy Jacks is in any of your secrets, better prepare for treachery. I know that he will be pinched, hard, to make him blow; and he'll surely sell out the whole gang, rather than stand punishment like a true brother."

Old Nate looked appealingly toward his daughter, and as she made a sign, he stepped to her side, their heads coming very near together as they consulted in hurried whispers.

The Bantam made no attempt to catch the purport of their talk, but waited quietly, as though confident all must come right in the end.

Old Nate, having received the desired cue, came back, to ask:

"S'posin' you found Marshall's gal was byar, what'd ye 'low to do?"

"Advise you, as a brother, to set her free, rather than run the risk of having her found and rescued by that dangerous gang, of course."

"You mean jest that, do ye?"

"Why not? Billy Jacks is one of the gang, but he'll blow on everything rather than stand out against hard pinching. He surely knows who took the girl. If you did—well, I say, give her up, and then pull out for healthier quarters!"

"Give her up, eh? To you, mebbe?"

There was a sneer in the old man's tones as he put this question, which ought to have warned the Bantam he was running a risk hardly prudent, but the Beauty showed no signs of uneasiness, meeting that keen gaze without flinching, then replying:

"Well, why not, since you've got to give her up, or pay the full penalty? I don't mention that, for you can guess what it will amount to, without any help from me."

"An' yit, you claim to be a true brother, don't ye?"

"I not only claim that as a fact, but I stand ready to prove it, as well. I'm warning you as a brother should another, when he sees that brother in sore peril. As for my restoring the young lady to her friends, I'm not only willing, but anxious to do just that!"

"What fer? What can you gain by doin' that, sence you run off—"

"Wouldn't that restoration clear me in their eyes, and so enable me to help the cause, by throwing more dirt in their way? Wouldn't—"

"Steady, you!" rung out the cold tones of Polly Hucks, over the tube of a leveled revolver. "I've got you lined; hands up, or die!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

BILLY JACKS IN TROUBLE.

No one person took a deeper interest in searching for signs or any positive clew through which a chance for finding and rescuing Edith Marshall might be had, than Paul Chapman, one of those who had wooed in vain where Julius Payne had so nearly won.

Possibly because he was so well aware of his own hot temper, he had kept aloof and said but very little during the examination of the two men, but when they were taken off to be held in bonds until a more favorable moment came for settling their exact share in that night's outrages, the young rancher took a more prominent part in the work.

He spurred the neighbors on to searching the premises for some clew to the abductors, and helped them spread that search for a full mile in every direction.

Trails were found in plenty, but nothing which could be declared that of the beauty-thieves. Indeed, as Chapman himself was forced to admit, it was a search where all were blind.

"If Marshall could be brought to reason!" he said, with a sudden frown, bearing Whitlow company back to the Spectacle Ranch. "One or both of those rascals surely ought to know something more about this affair, than they've let out, as yet. If we might pinch them!"

"I reckon it's what we've got to come to, Marshall or no Marshall," grimly said his present companion. "Worry for his wife hinders him feeling the loss of Edith so bad, just now, but when he does get over the numbness such a blow gives—well, he'll be worse than a grizzly!"

"The main trouble is like this," Chapman added, with a frown of uneasy perplexity. "It's easy enough to set a lot of fellows in motion, with even less excuse than this offers, but—how about stopping them when we've got what we're after?"

Whitlow made no response, save by a significant shrug of the shoulders. He knew that the young rancher had touched the main difficulty, and that "pinching" would almost surely end in hanging.

Neither of them were willing to assume the prime responsibility, but time was passing fast, and each hour that was wasted might render it just so much the more difficult to rescue the missing maiden.

As the searchers gathered again at the Spectacle Ranch, not one of them all had aught of good tidings to impart, and as Dexter Marshall listened, his bowed form and altered countenance told how severely he was feeling the blows fate was dealing him so heavily.

His wife was suffering greatly, though more on account of their absent child than from the dastardly blow which had felled her to the floor when she sprung to save Edith. If the missing one could be restored to her arms, all would be well. If not, the doctor feared her brain must suffer worse.

As he heard this, from Marshall's own lips, Paul Chapman threw all caution to the winds, and cried, almost fiercely:

"There's one way of getting at the truth, and if we decline to avail ourselves of that chance, we're guilty ourselves! One or both of those two fellows can give us the clew we need; bring 'em out, and make 'em confess, under penalty!"

It was like dropping a lighted match among loose tow; the gathering instantly took fire, and ugly, menacing cries rose in concert.

"No bloody work, friends!" cried Marshall, joining in the human wave which swept toward the out-buildings in which the prisoners had been stowed away, under guard. "Make 'em confess, if you can, but—"

"No killing, no hanging, even, but tell they shall!" grimly declared Chapman.

Since the man who was to have married Edith had disappeared, under worse than a cloud, the young ranch-owner was once more plucking up spirit; who could blame him?

Then it came that the escape of Bantam Bob was discovered, leaving Daniel Dumphrey, his guard, lying bound and gagged in his place.

Those first few minutes were very miserable ones for Daniel, and before he could convince the excited crowd that he was an entirely innocent sufferer, instead of a cunning sinner, he received some pretty rough handling, and fright sufficient to last him the rest of his natural lifetime.

Luckily for him, Bantam Bob had spoken no more than the truth when he said the Steer Buccaneers would not permit him to be lynched by the indignant crowd. All unsuspected by their companions, there were enough of the lawless gang present to prevent actual injury to this, one of their "family."

Then, too, Billy Jacks proved another safety-valve. The cowboy was safely under guard, doubtless because the man who had him in charge had no interest in the rustlers, beyond wishing them all hung, shot, or otherwise dispatched to their patron saint, Prince Lucifer.

In spite of his bodily fears, Dan Dumphrey retained wit enough to tell the story supplied him by Bantam Bob, and to stick doggedly to that line of defense.

He had been surprised while keeping guard faithfully enough, and that through no fault of his own. He had caught but an imperfect look at the main rescuer, even supposing there was more than one, which he could not swear to. And if his life hung upon it, he could not swear to any feature by which that rescuer might be identified.

"Leave him where he is, until we can talk a bit with Billy Jacks," suggested Chapman, and his idea was carried out, despite the objections offered by poor Dumphrey.

The cowboy seemed almost paralyzed with fright when he was taken from his guard and hustled forth under the bright sun. He begged for life and mercy, but little attention was paid to his prayers until he was beneath a convenient tree, from a limb of which dangled a ready lariat.

Now that the witness was waiting, there came a brief pause, during which glances were interchanged. Some one must take the lead, but none of the party seemed eager to fill that position.

Naturally, Dexter Marshall should be the one, since his interest in the matter was paramount to all others; but just then the Spectacle owner was poorly fitted for a position calling for both iron nerve and cool brain.

He shook his head, visibly shrinking from attempting what he felt wholly unfitted for, hoarsely speaking:

"I couldn't—just couldn't! If I were to try, I'd kill the fellow at his first word of— You, Chapman!"

The man named flushed hotly, then paled again. He hesitated, but only for a bare second or two, then assumed the grave responsibility.

During this brief delay Billy Jacks had fought for composure, and now stood under that significant noose, scowling, dogged, nerved for the trying ordeal.

"I don't know nothin' 'bout it, an' so cain't say," was the first response, when Chapman bade him reveal who the abductors were. "Ef this yer sort o' treatment is what a pore devil gits fer fightin' fire fer 'nother person, durned ef I'll ever run the resk ag'in!"

"You're not at all likely to ever have another chance, Billy, without you steer a bit closer to the truth than you're doing just now," coldly retorted Chapman. "Bluffing don't go down with us, and a fellow who has played so much dirt as you have of late, needn't try to come the injured angel racket."

Billy Jacks gave a sulky growl, but that was all. He surely could see that his life was in danger, but he was not ready to make open confession as yet. Then, too, he doubtless depended on the members of the Steer Buccaneers present to save him from actual harm.

"Will you confess the whole truth, Jacks, or must we swing you up by the neck for a bit?"

"You ask fer truth, an' I'm givin' it to ye. Ef you want lies, jest say so, an' I'll do my level best, boss. Ef I don't know, how kin I tell?"

"I believe y u do know, Billy, and the sooner you spit out the plain facts, the sooner you'll be free. As a starter, let me stir up your memory just a little bit.

"You came here, last night, with Bulldog John Kenmuir. You knew he was after a man accused of willful murder. That man was your employer. Then, why did you act as guide to the sheriff and his posse?"

"To help the law, an'— Wnal, sence you must know, to play even for a dirty bit o' cussin' the boss give me when I broke up a po' y, fer bein' too big a devil even fer me to ride. Now, take it, dug-gun yel!"

"For the lie it surely is," coldly retorted Chapman. "You guided Kenmuir, simply in order to gain his good opinion, knowing that you were unable to warn Julius Payne in time for him to levant."

"Never, nuther; I hated him too mighty hot, I tell ye, man!"

"Then why did you side in with the gang at the Upper Ford? Why did you knock Kenmuir cold, and help his prisoner escape?"

"Beca'se I reckoned they 'lowed fer to lynch Payne, an' I wanted a hand in, my own self—that's why," sullenly growled the cowboy.

"You lie, and we all can see it!" fiercely cried the rancher, losing his forced composure all at once. "You plotted and worked to save Payne, not alone because he was your employer, but because you belonged to the same evil gang! Payne was, and is yet, a Steer Buccaneer, just as you are a member of the cursed thieves! Don't deny it, for—"

"I do deny it!" hoarsely cried the prisoner, his face blanching with fear at those ugly, ominous sounds, coming from the majority of the crowd. "I hain't no rustler, an' I be a honest puncher! I never—"

That ominous growl increased to a roar, and as hands went out to clutch rope and victim, just so others sprung to the rescue. Prominent among them was Dexter Marshall, who faced the mass, pistols in hand, sharply crying aloud:

"Back, gentlemen! Back, I say! No lynching after—"

"Hands off, one and all!" thundered Paul Chapman, boldly seconding the Spectacle owner. "Time enough for hanging when we can't do better. Billy knows—let him confess, first of all!"

Other strong men and good backed them up, and the danger was warded off, at least for the present.

When the mass drew back, leaving only a few armed men around the prisoner, it was noted how terribly Jacks had been frightened by the near approach of death. Only for supporting hands, he would have fallen to earth, a limp and nerveless heap.

"Don't let 'em, boss!" he gasped, hoarsely, the picture of abject terror. "I never—Lord knows I never—"

Paul Chapman clapped a hand over those lips, then sternly spoke:

"Don't throw away your last chance for life, Billy Jacks! We're in deadly earnest, as you ought to see, by now. We're bound to get at the bottom facts, and you surely can help us out."

"I never—cross my heart ef—"

"You helped set Julius Payne free, and his cursed hand shows all through this foul outrage! Tell us how the deed was done, where Miss Marshall was taken for safe keeping and hiding, or sure as the sun is shining up yonder, just so sure we'll hang you higher than Haman!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

A CLEW AT LAST.

BILLY JACKS shrunk visibly from that fierce charge, but when he made reply, it was along the same line of defense.

"I never—I reckoned 'twas to lynch the boss, an' so I—"

"What became of him, after the rescue, then?" sternly asked Marshall.

"I don't know, fer true, sir. I was hustled out o' the lump. I hed to make a break to save my own hide, as I told ye afore. An' so—ef I didn't, boss, hope to die next minnit!"

"That hope shall be fully realized, Billy, unless you come to Limerick," grimly interposed Paul Chapman. "Now—business, old man! Who comprised that rescuing party, outside of your honest self, Jacks?"

"I don't know that, nyther. Jest a gang; mebbe a dozen, mebbe more. They was all rigged up, so's nobody couldn't say which was which, or one was t'other. An' so I'm—"

"Lying, as usual! Friends," flashing a glance over the interested gathering. "When a bird can sing, and won't sing, what's the remedy?"

"No violence, gentlemen!" cried Marshall, uneasily.

"Nothing more than we're naturally obliged to use," firmly but half-coaxingly muttered Chapman. "Go see how your wife is, Marshall, and leave me to run this job—please?"

"You'll not—too much?"

"No, only enough, I pledge you my word of honor, sir," came the swift reply, and then, as the father passed away from that immediate vicinity, Chapman slipped the noose over the cowboy's head, drawing it snugly about his neck while adding: "Business, Billy! Make a clean breast of the whole trick, or you'll wake up in— not Heaven, be sure!"

Willing hands grasped the rope, and after a brief pause to enable the prisoner to confess, if he so wished, Chapman gave the signal, and the wretched fellow was drawn, struggling horribly, off his feet.

Barely a score of seconds he was held clear of the ground, then a sharp command from the rancher caused the rope to slacken, and his strong arm supported Billy Jacks, while his other hand quickly loosened the suffocating noose.

"Will you own up, you bull-headed fool?" he asked, sternly, as the cowboy gasped and groaned, little the worse for his suspension, apart from terror. "Name some of those who formed the party which set Julius Payne free, or—go up, for good!"

"I didn't—thar was a woman 'long—"

"Hal!" ejaculated Chapman, like one to whom has come a startling revelation. "A woman! And a woman in men's clothes helped— Glory, friends! Old Nate Hucks's girl, or I'm a liar!"

"He was—old Hucks was thar," said Billy Jacks, shivering like one with the ague.

"A clew! A clew at last!" excitedly cried Chapman, letting the cowboy sink to the ground although of no further use. "Strange we didn't think of that, first off!"

All was confusion for the next few minutes, and only for his bonds, Billy Jacks might have made his escape unnoticed; but it was not to be that way, and when Paul Chapman rallied a bit from his intense excitement, he caused the prisoner to be prepared for the road with them.

"We'll bring him face to face with the two Huckses, and then get at the solid truth!" said he, feverishly excited, now that a chance seemed to offer for the restoration of the woman beloved, to her parents.

Dexter Marshall seemed more uneasy than elated, however, and lifted his voice in favor of caution.

"If it's true, and they did take my poor girl, they'll know the penalty, and if crowded—for heaven's sake, friends! go easy! Don't give the devils a chance to harm her—my girl!"

"For Edith's dear sake we'll be cautious, Marshall," said Chapman, giving that hand a warm grip, something of his own hopes shining in his dark eyes as he added, in a whisper: "Would I do ought to endanger the dear girl, Marshall? I, who love her—I'd rather die!"

He broke off abruptly, turning away as though afraid to betray his real emotions too openly.

Dexter Marshall looked after him with a troubled expression coming into his honest eyes. He had always favored his suit, as against that preferred by Julius Payne, but now—would Edith ever repay him as this fidelity deserved?

The preparations for taking the road for the place known far and wide as the Old Station, did not consume many minutes, yet it was late in the afternoon before a start was made, for that fruitless search for sign, and the questioning of Billy Jacks had taken time.

"All the better for us, I reckon," said Whitlow, when they were in the saddle and fairly on their way. "By this time, Old Hucks'll begin to think he's covered his tracks so carefully that even a bloodhound couldn't pick up the trail, and so he'll not be so keen on guard."

"If Billy wasn't lying, just to save his neck, you mean," dubiously offered another member of the rescuing party.

"A man of caliber can't well lie while death is staring him in the face, and only truth can help cheat the devil," dryly observed Paul Chapman. "I'm confident that, even if Miss Marshall isn't at their house, she's where they can put hand upon her, when wanted. And—well, if we once get the old rascal and his girl in our grip, I'll go bail for the rest!"

That point was dropped, for the time being, but the fact of their heading for the Old Station, brought back memories, and one of these was touched upon by Whitlow.

"Strange, isn't it? How many times have we lost track of our stolen stock, not very far from that shebang? And we never once suspected that Old Nate was other than he seemed: an old fish, but honest enough as the world wags. Now—if he'd do a dirty trick like this, wouldn't be mix in the rustling?"

There were arguments, pro and con, but the point was not definitely settled, beyond the fact that Old Nate should be closely questioned concerning the Steer Buccaneers and those mysterious vanishing of plain trails, before he was made to pay the full penalty of this outrage.

Other remarks were made concerning the woman who had taken part in the abduction, but very little was known of her, since her coming to that section had been of recent date.

The most that any of the party could offer, it seemed, was the bare fact that such a woman made her home with Old Nate at the ruined stage station, and that she was a rare beauty to have such an ungainly, uncouth being for a father.

Paul Chapman listened to these various comments, with a frown upon his handsome face. He did not offer to join in, and finally, when his opinion was asked by another, he curtly observed:

"Better be thinking how we can best capture

them both, gentlemen. Time enough to settle all other doubts when we have the power."

With cautious forethought, a couple of scouts were sent on in advance, to give warning in case anything like spies should be in the way. If so, measures must be taken to cut them off from the station, before they could convey information of such an expedition being afoot.

Nothing suspicious was noted on the way, as it happened, and as the sun set and the shades of night began to deepen, Paul Chapman called a halt, while yet some little distance from the place they were heading for in such high hopes.

"Time to settle on our plans, gentlemen," he said, gravely, as all drew rein and looked for an explanation. "I hardly think Old Hucks would be reckless enough to work harm to Miss Marshall if we were to ride openly up to his ranch, but of course we can't afford to run even the ghost of a risk, unnecessarily."

"I beg that you'll be careful, friends," pleaded Marshall. "If any more harm should come to my child, it'd finish killing her poor mother!"

"No harm shall touch her dear head, while I can ward it off, dear sir," earnestly spoke Chapman, then adding, quickly: "My idea is like this: we'll leave our horses near here, under cover, then steal up to the house on foot. By surrounding it, we can guard against any break-away, and by showing Old Nate that we're too many for him to even dream of showing fight to, we'll force him to open, easy!"

Though so simple, this really appeared to be the wisest plan of procedure, and without a single dissenting voice it was adopted.

The party dismounted and secured their animals. They made sure their weapons were in working order, then stole silently toward the Old Station, eager for the "round-up."

The building was dark and showed no signs of life as the party came in sight of it, but without losing time, the surround was effected.

This done, Paul Chapman, with one hand gripping Billy Jacks, whose voice he meant to avail himself of on occasion, rapped sharply against the closed front door.

There was no answer, and as the seconds crept by, not a sound came to their waiting ears from the interior.

Again he rapped, this time with a vigor which sent the echoes entirely through the rickety old building, but still the same; to all seeming the place was utterly deserted!

"Out o' the way, you!" hoarsely cried Dexter Marshall, his worst fears aroused, then dashing his brawny shoulders against the barrier.

The door flew wide open, and the rescuers rushed in, but the one they hoped to rescue was not there; the birds had surely flown!

CHAPTER XXXIII.

POLLY TURNS MAN-TAKER.

A SINGLE glance into the face of Miss Polly Hucks, just then, would have convinced any sane person that she meant every syllable that passed her red lips.

Bantam Bob might have felt mad, but he certainly was not crazy, and after taking that one swift look, promptly complied with her order, lifting his empty hands well over his bristling cockscorn, feebly venturing:

"I never could deny a fair lady, and you—"

"Button up! None of your tricks, with tongue or hands, my little innocent! It'd be a pity to rob this world of such a charmingly unique freak, but—I can do even that, if I must."

An expression of mingled amazement and disgust came into the face of Butte's Beauty, and his hands showed an inclination to lower as their owner began to suspect this was more than an erratic freak on the part of a whim-loving girl.

"Keep 'em up, Bantam, or they'll come down in a heap!" warned Polly, losing in grace what she gained in force of expression. "You're tricky by your own account, but only straight goods pass current with us. It's submit or croak, and I'm not caring so mighty much which horn of the dilemma you elect to be tossed by."

"Of course, it's a rare good jest, ma'am, but I fail to see the point as clearly as I ought, perhaps," stilly uttered Bantam Bob, trying to force a smile, but only conjuring up the gauntly ghost of a grin.

"We'll give you time enough to puzzle it out, then, little man. Now, pap?"

"Which, Polly?"

"Just slip back of the giant, and draw his teeth, will you? And you, my very dear sir, think twice before you try to turn a trick. I'd really hate to kill you, before quite deciding whether you are wise man or fool, but I'll do it, mighty quick, rather than waste any more time through your buffoonery. Now—hold steady, or fare worse!"

It was a bitter enough dose for any man to take, but the Beauty from Butte appeared particularly disgusted with the potion meted out to him by this fair young Amazon.

He dared not offer resistance to his captors, for Polly stood ready to assist Old Nate in the disarming process, and trouble could only come to himself through cutting up rusty.

Old Hucks quickly performed the duty as-

signed him, disarming the little adventurer from behind his back, passing inquisitive hands over his person to make sure no dangerous tools were lying out of sight, before drawing back with the announcement that his work was done.

"No, only begun, pap," retorted Polly, with a faint smile, still keeping Bantam Bob covered with her gun. "There's the right sort of stuff, by the chimney. Take it, and truss the little boy up, please!"

"I say!" protested the Beauty, with a fine show of injured pride. "A joke's a joke when you don't run it clean into the ground, then it becomes an insult! I'll let this nonsense pass for what it's worth, but rather than submit to more, I'll kick, and kick so—"

"You will kick—death-kick!" sternly interrupted Polly, her big dark eyes flashing over that leveled weapon. "Steady, you! Business, pap!"

The Bantam might have been sufficiently angry to have killed another, but he certainly was not so mad as to cut his own throat, or, rather, cause his own brains to be blown out. And so he quietly submitted to having his limbs securely bound by Nathan Hucks, Polly acting as mistress of ceremonies throughout.

Not until the little fellow was completely hampered, did Polly Hucks relax her vigilance in the least degree; then she lowered and put away her pistol, seemingly content to give Bantam Bob at least a chance to expostulate against her sudden sentence.

"I didn't think it of you, Miss Polly!" he began, in grievous reproach. "After all the risk I've run, just to bring you word of warning, to have you—what have I done to deserve such treatment?"

"Nothing, according to your own say-so, of course, Bobby," retorted Polly, with another gesture to her sire, who lost no time in acting upon it. "You're a little tin angel with painted wings and gilt crown, never a doubt of it all! And yet, I must say—make a good job of it, pap!"

From a position beyond Bantam Bob's eye-range, Old Nate, in obedience to that signal, quickly shaped a gag and means of holding it in place. Now, pouncing upon the bound man, he endeavored to force his jaws open wide enough to introduce that indigestible mouthful.

But that seemed to be running the jest into the ground, and Bob struggled angrily, for the first time giving utterance to threats.

"Let up, you old fool! And you—give over this folly, or you'll have to answer to the chief for spoiling all his plans! Let up, I say, or I'll be the death o' ye both!"

"The chief don't know you for a member, for he told me so with his own tongue," retorted Polly, coming to the assistance of her father.

"He said to capture you if you ventured here, and hold you until he got back. So—"

"The chief did? You'll take oath to that, sister?" asked the little man from Butte, in evident surprise.

"He just did, so you may as well abandon that hope, my boy!"

"Why didn't you say so, by word and grip, then?" sharply demanded the Bantam, abruptly ceasing his struggles, opening his jaws voluntarily for the gag.

This was promptly inserted and secured in place, then a heavy grain-sack was drawn over Robert's head and shoulders, not only shutting off all sight, but muffling his sense of hearing as well.

Possibly this was even more than he had calculated upon, for he gave sundry vigorous kicks, rolling from side to side in the endeavor to get rid of that blindfold; but, he was dealing with persons who knew what thorough work was, and all his efforts were in vain.

One of Polly's hands closed warningly on his arm, and her voice came distinctly through that muffler:

"Don't be a bigger fool than you were born, stranger. Kicking isn't going to help you out, and may make matters still worse for you in the end. If you're clean white, and just as you've represented, I dare say all will be straightened out when the chief can give your record a careful overhauling."

"That can't be just now, and he reckoned you'd be safer in limbo than on the loose. That's why this is thus. You came, we saw, and conquered, too, I'm thinking!"

"You're chawin' wind turrible hard over a weenty matter, 'pears to me, Polly," grumbled Old Nate, adding in a harsh tone: "Act decent, an' we'll treat ye white. Play fool, an' you'll ketch it 'cordin'." An' thar you've got the hull law an' gospel, critter!"

Bob made no reply, simply because that was beyond his power. Certainly he could hardly have been satisfied by that very one-sided argument, although Old Nate seemingly felt that all essential points had been provided for.

For some little time the bagged Robert was left lying on the floor, while his captors drew aside, apparently earnestly discussing some important point. The Beauty could catch an occasional murmuring sound which convinced him such was the case, but beyond that he could not say: not a syllable could be caught, even by his keen ears.

An amicable understanding was reached, apparently, for Old Nate and his daughter took hold of their prisoner, between them bearing him forth to open air, then along for some little distance further.

Bantam Bob would have been less than human if he had not tried to make up for the lack of sight, by calling upon his other senses, and through their response he knew that he was being taken in a northerly course, then shifting toward the east for a few paces, the entire trip being only a few rods, when he was dumped unceremoniously to the ground.

Something softer than bare ground was beneath him, and his sense of smell told him his first stop was located in a stable.

He strained his ears in listening, but not a word was spoken by either of his captors, and what other sounds he could catch, were too vague and indefinite to convey much information.

Then he was picked up and carried onward, once more, passing from the stable into a cooler, purer atmosphere. Somehow that air gave him the impression of being under ground, or in a passage of some description which was shaded from the sun's rays, yet had a free flow of pure air.

Twice his captors paused, resting him on the ground or upon rocks, apparently for the purpose of taking breath; but on neither occasion did they speak, and once again that blind journey was resumed.

"There!" suddenly exclaimed Polly, like one relieved, as she certainly was of her share of the burden, for Bantam Bob dropped to a rocky level with more haste than care for his bones. "So much for so much, and I reckon you can finish this part of the job, pap!"

"Whar's the use o' botherin'?" growlingly asked Old Nate. "Don't reckon he'll git so hongry afore—"

"Orders, and we've had ours, pap! Safe keep, he said, but keep safe, he added. That means treat as white as we dare. Do it, then come!"

Grumblingly, yet apparently afraid to flatly rebel, Old Nate pulled that blinding grain-sack from over Bantam Bob's head, then cut the thongs which held the gag in position.

"Make the most of it, dug-gun ye, critter!" he said, sulkily.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

PREPARING FOR THE END.

LEAVING Old Nate to follow, after he had performed the duty assigned him, Polly Hucks left the little den-like cave into which Bantam Bob had been borne, retracing the steps they had taken since leaving the Old Station.

Her surroundings would have amazed many an old residenter in that section, for only the secret few even suspected that communication with a snug little valley deep down in the heart of that rocky range, could be had from that side of the mountains.

On either hand the naked rocks rose abruptly, possible for human feet to cross if working in tune with clear, steady brains, but seemingly practicable for nothing less active than mountain goat or cat.

With a hand that seemed used to the trick, Polly lifted and pushed aside a woven screen of wild grape-vines, laying bare the mouth of a dark passage, amply large enough to admit even a horseman, yet clearly the work of human hands.

This ran straight through the hill for several rods, ending in a still more ingenious masked entrance: her strong hand swinging aside what appeared to be part of a solid rear-wall of the station stable!

Right there lay the key to many of the enigmas which had for two years past perplexed the stock-growers of that section, for, as the woman passed through, the wall swung shut behind her, leaving not the slightest trace of an opening.

Polly cast a keen glance around before leaving the stables, but nothing out of the ordinary run met her eyes, and she hastened directly to the house, entering it and passing up-stairs to where Edith Marshall was kept in confinement.

The poor girl started up at that coming, but a gesture from Polly checked her ejaculation of mingled fear, anger and reproach.

"Wait, Miss Marshall, for this is neither time nor place to say all you wish. Don't force me to treat you still more harshly, please!"

"But—Mr. Payne?" faltered Edith, anxiously.

"Is my husband, and I don't care to discuss him with you, at least for the present. I've come to warn you that circumstances make it necessary for us to change your quarters for a brief time. If you trust in us, I swear by all men hold holy, no harm shall come to you, and that you shall be given your liberty. Still, we've got to look out for our own interests, and if you endanger them, your folly must be checked—in advance, too!"

"I don't— Oh, if you are a woman in more than shape—"

"Being a woman is just why I'm acting after this manner," came the swift check, once more. "Quiet, now! My father's coming, and he'll have mighty little mercy for one who is too foolish to— Come in, pap!"

"I'm comin', hain't I?" growlingly spoke Old Nate, who seemed to grow less even-tempered.

with the passage of each minute. "Git her ready, gal, ef you don't want me to do the fixin' up!"

"Quiet, child!" murmured the woman, preparing a blindfold while adding that caution. "No harm is meant, and none shall come unless you bring it on yourself by acting foolishly. Submit quietly to what you are unable to hinder, and all will be well, in the end."

"Promise me—"

"Promise be durned!" gruffly interrupted Old Nat, with an impatient gesture. "They's bin too mighty much talkin' done a'ready, I'm thinkin'. Git down to business, Polly, or I'll do the bossin' my own self—an' that's words with the bark onto 'em!"

"Never mind pap, Miss Marshall," said the woman, gently but securely blindfolding the maiden. "His growl's a powerful sight worse than his bite, since he's lost so many of his teeth, and—"

"You shet, gal! I kin bite with the next critter, an' I've got better teeth than you even ef thar hain't quite so many. An' ef you—"

"Oh, button up, pap! You make me too weary for any sort o' use!"

Polly laughed as she spoke, but Old Nate appeared too angry for a fitting retort. He caught hold of Edith, and between them they carried her forth from the Old Station, much in the same manner as they had conveyed Bantam Bob, a short while before.

Edith pleaded to walk, but permission was denied her. Fearing still worse treatment, the poor girl submitted with as good grace as she could summon, but she took no note of their route, and failed to draw the interesting deductions which had rewarded Bantam Bob on a similar journey.

The Huckses, father and daughter, conveyed Edith by the same route, through the stable, the secret passage, into the secluded valley which had harbored so many head of "rustled" stock while brands were being changed or removed entirely, and fresh ear-marks being cut and healed.

For this long, narrow valley, with its numerous caves and niches in each rocky wall, had been long utilized by the Steer Buccaneers for the purpose of growing rich off of other peoples' earnings, and never until now had the faintest suspicion been awakened concerning the old stage station or its surroundings.

Passing through a short stretch of the narrow valley, Edith was taken a few yards up the rocks, then into a small, fairly dry and airy den, which had clearly been prepared for her reception.

Near the rear of the little den, a fair bed of dry grass had been arranged, covered over with a woollen blanket, and upon this pallet Edith Marshall was deposited by her captors.

A gesture from Polly caused Old Nate to fall back to the entrance, which was shaded and partially screened by a mass of vines, then in full foliage, where he slouchingly waited the pleasure of his rather too masterful "gal."

Polly removed the blindfold, permitting Edith to gaze timidly about the place for a few seconds before speaking to the maiden. Then she gently touched an arm, to call attention her way, after which she spoke in rapid, yet not unkindly tones:

"Don't look so frightened, Miss Marshall, for I swear to you that no actual harm is intended."

"What are you going to do with me?" asked Edith, trying to steady her voice, dully wondering why her usual nerve was so weakened.

"Leave you here, in peace and quietness, for a few hours, my dear," came the quick response. "We've been forced to alter our plans a bit, but 'twill all come to the same thing in the end."

"You said I might— Oh, if you are a woman, let me go back to my parents, my home! I never harmed you, and I—"

"Never willingly, or willfully, I admit," cut in Polly, her brows contracting sharply, her voice catching a harder note. "And yet, you came perilously near to dealing me the bitterest blow one woman can inflict upon another!"

"Whar's the sense in gwine into all that, Polly?" grunted Old Nate. "Jest tell her what's which, an' wharfo', then drap it, cain't ye?"

"You bush, pap. I'm running this part of the business, I reckon," his dutiful daughter retorted, sharply; yet that check apparently effected some good, since she spoke more to the point. "But that don't matter just now, and I've got other work to do before all's safe."

"As I said before, we 'lowed to set you free and show you the right way home, just as soon as you were convinced that the man you knew as Julius Payne, could never be more to you than an ugly memory. Stop!" as Edith was about to speak. "If you weren't convinced by the proof I offered, then you ought to be!"

"All I carried you off for was to convince you that you couldn't have any further truck with another woman's husband. I let you hear, and I let you see, then I meant to turn you loose, but I've had to alter that plan, for the bounds are too hot on our track. Even giving you back your liberty wouldn't choke 'em off, and so—this is what we've come to, as next best thing."

"We'll leave you here, bound so that you can't stray away. We'll put food and drink, so

that you can manage it with the use of your lips and teeth. There'll be enough to keep you from feeling lack of either for a week, if help shouldn't come before; but *that's* out of the question, and needn't trouble you a mite."

"If your friends, who are hot on your trail this minute, shouldn't find you to-day or to-night, then word will be dropped at the Spectacle Ranch, clearly describing where you are, and how to get at your place of hiding."

"I swear all this, by my dead mother's grave!"

"But, why—"

"Silence! I've no time to hear your questions, and though you were given leave to talk and argue from now until to-morrow, nothing you could say or might offer, would alter our resolution one iota. Here you are, and here you remain until we've got a start of the hounds, long enough to carry us safely away."

"Git it over, gal! Thar's more truck to 'tend to, an' them cussed critters may come hyer, jest a-whoopin'; don't you know it?"

"You have cords; hand 'em over, pap," curtly said Polly, holding forth a hand, which was immediately supplied by Old Nate. "Now, Miss Marshall, the quieter you take it, the easier it'll come. We've got to keep you from straying, and that's flat!"

Poor Edith longed to resist, but knowing how helpless she would be in their hands, she submitted to have her feet securely bound together.

Then Polly rose, drew away, saying to Old Nate:

"Come, pap! Now for my husband!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE BANTAM CROWS AGAIN.

QUITE sufficient has already been said to make perfectly clear the fact that, to use the vernacular, Miss Polly Hucks was running things to suit her own sweet self on that particular occasion.

Old Nate growled, but submitted, and when "his gal" left him to "put on the finishing touches," so far as the Beauty from Butte was concerned, the veteran cut very little time to waste.

So viciously did he growl and grumble, that Bantam Bob could not avoid shivering a bit, as those claw-like fingers fumbled about his head and face.

"What if the old barbarian meant to cut his throat, or lift his scalp? What if the orders to which Polly had so sternly referred, meant his dispatch from this bothersome, tangled-up world?"

Instead, Old Nate removed the uncomfortable grain-sack with which he had been blinded, then cut away the gag, leaving all other bonds in place, however.

"Shet trap, dug-gun ye!" he snarlingly spoke, as Bantam Bob thought to win still greater favors while he was in this mood. "Ef I hed my own way, I'd be puttin' ye clean beyond resk o' ever kickin' up any mo' botheration—an' that's gospel!"

"The chief will be back—when, pardner?"

"When he gits back, I reckon," grunted the soured old man, kicking the discarded grain-sack aside as he made for the entrance. "An' when he *does* come, it'll be *you* that's wishin' he hedn't, too, dug-gun ye!"

"When he does come, it'll be to beg my pardon for making such a nasty mistake, or to punish you for being such infernal idiots as to twist his meaning all crooked!" boldly declared the Beauty from Butte. "I tell you, man, I can make your boss kneel in the dirt at my feet, just by crookin' my little finger! I can make him dust my old boots with his tongue as brush, simply by—"

Bantam Bob left that sentence unfinished, simply because Old Nate had beaten a retreat, either in supreme disgust at such a liar, or through dread lest Polly cut up rusty over his unnecessary delay.

And with Nathan Hucks, vanished a goodly portion of that stern defiance which the little fellow had assumed for that occasion only. His proud smile vanished, and as those shuffling foot-falls died away on his listening ear, Bantam Bob looked sober enough for a dozen.

"Of course I couldn't let that graybeard suspect as much," he soliloquized, while testing the bonds which had been applied to his wrists under Polly's supervision, "but—*was* I lying? Am I quite so anxious to receive a call from the chief as I tried to make Old Nate believe?"

Bantam Bob set about twisting and working his supple wrist-joints, like one who fancies an easy task lies before him, but there appeared to be some unlooked for hitch, and without answering his own questions, he gave all his attention to those obstinate bonds.

While they were being applied, Bantam Bob had taken care to swell the muscles and strain the cords of his wrists all that he could, at the same time holding them as far apart as he dared. He believed his precautions were sufficient to enable him to work his hands free, and this was the work to which he had fallen the instant Old Nate had fairly passed beyond ear-shot.

Contrary to his expectation, the cords had been drawn too tight for easy liberty, and one less determined to succeed might well have yielded to despair. But not so with Bantam Bob.

"I will, because I *must*!" he muttered, with dogged force. "It's a ground-hog case; I've got to do the job, or the job will be done for me! And if 'tis, I'll be done brown, with it!"

Fortunately for his hopes of escape, Bantam Bob had large bones for a small man, so far as his arms and legs were concerned, while his hands were smaller than the average for his size and weight.

He could not break the bonds, nor could he cause so much as a knot to slip; but by paying no attention to pain, and by sacrificing sundry patches of skin, he finally succeeded in drawing one hand free.

At first, this seemed a costly victory, for the member was numbed, and only after casting aside the blood-stained thongs, and chafing his hands and wrists, one with the other, did Bantam Bob recover their full use once more.

When that was done, he sat up, beginning to pick and pull at the bonds which confined his feet and legs, grumbling at the thorough search which had deprived him of all aids to liberty on an easier plan.

But fate seemed inclined to play him another evil trick, since his lower half was still completely hampered, when he caught the sound of a husky, clearing-throat cough, only a short distance away from his den.

"Old Nate—coming here!" flashed through the Beauty's brain, flinging out his hands in an instinctive effort to lift himself upon his feet. "What if he fetches— Hal!"

His right hand touched a loose object in the gloom, and grasping it tightly, Bantam Bob sunk back in his former position, his arms and hands hidden by his body, as before.

None too soon. With another hawking cough, Old Nate stopped to enter the dingy den, his figure fairly outlined against the light background. And with breathless interest Bantam Bob watched for another shape to follow.

"Will he fetch the chief?" was the query which interested him above all others, just then. "Has he come back, to put me to the test?"

Old Nate seemed to expect anything but such perfect silence, and stopping short when just inside the little cave, both hands occupied with food and drink, as it afterward proved, he peered uneasily toward the spot where the little fellow had been left, in bonds.

"I say, you runty scrub!" called forth Old Nate, in an irritable tone of voice. "None o' yer dug-gun fool-hness, now! Ef ye ain't fast a-snorin', why don't ye say so—hey?"

"Sleep?" growlingly retorted Bantam Bob, apparently in an even worse humor than was his visitor, just then. "Who could sleep, or even think of sleeping, with a point of rock, sharper than carpet-tacks and longer'n the moral law, boring its way between a poor devil's ribs as often as he— Ouch!"

"Thar, be ye!" came from Old Nate, in evident relief. "You was so pesky still that I didn't know but what ye'd tuck—eh?"

"Did the chief bid you torture me, worse than ever an Injun would dare dream of—say?" snarled the Beauty, viciously. "If he didn't, then—I say, pardner," abruptly descending to the coaxing tone, "if you'd just be so kind as to pull this point out, or shift me to a less torturing couch, I'd feel like kissing you for a solid month!"

Old Nate gave a cracking laugh at the unique inducement, but then he freed his hands by placing his parcels on the rock-floor, stepping forward and stooping over the seeming sufferer, to—

Fall like a mass of clay across Bantam Bob, as that strong right arm, the hand of which gripped the rough fragment of rock so fortunately discovered, swung around, driving all consciousness from that brain.

Bantam Bob dropped the stone, gripping Old Nate by the throat with fierce earnestness, to smother all outcry if possible. None came, for none was attempted. That blow had been sure as it was swift, and the old fellow was past working more harm, at least for the present.

When fully satisfied on this point by the sense of touch, Bantam Bob loosened his grip, keeping one hand ready to smother groan or cry, then fumbling at the old fellow's waist with his other five fingers.

"Good enough!" as he struck the buck-horn haft of the hunting-knife, habitually worn by the borderman. "Now, wait just a wee bit longer, the rest of you sweet-scented creatures!"

With that keen blade as an aid, it took less than a score of seconds for Bantam Bob to complete his liberation, so far as mere bonds went.

His lower limbs at his disposal, he rolled Old Nate over, then rose erect, crossing over to the mouth of the little cave, to take a swift but comprehensive glance outside. He saw nothing to occasion him immediate alarm or even uneasiness, and so returned to his victim, stripping off the belt of arms, and quickly fitting it to his lesser girth.

Not until he had done this, and satisfied himself that both of the heavy revolvers were loaded

and fit for use where a man's life hung in the balance, did Bantam Bob give old Nate an examination.

"Skull too mighty thick for breaking with—eh?" as the veteran gave a shiver and a faint groan under his probing touch. "Too mighty much alive for leaving unbound, my dear old friend!"

Making use of the cords which he had cheated, Bantam Bob was not long in trussing Old Nate up, almost as thoroughly as he himself had been left, while the big, bony hands of the fellow rendered a similar escape altogether out of the question.

He applied the gag, as well, and none too soon; Old Nate was rallying from that heavy stroke, and as he tried to make use of his voice, another one came from only a short distance away from the mouth of that dingy little den.

"I say, you pap!"

The voice of Polly Hucks, and pitched in an impatient tone, as though its owner had come hither in quest of her dilatory parent.

Bantam Bob stole silently to the entrance, keeping to one side, in order to avoid discovery by the approaching Amazon. Then, with pistol cocked in his left hand, and pistol clubbed in his right, he crouched in ambush while Polly entered the trap. Then—

"Hands up, Polly, or die!" he cried, almost in her own words.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

MAKING THE BEST OF IT.

POLLY HUCKS gave an involuntary cry, taken entirely off her guard by that wholly unexpected summons, and before she could rally her wits or her nerve sufficiently to defend herself, Bantam Bob sprang forward and tore away the belt of arms with which her middle was graced.

"Steady, Polly!" he cried, sternly. "I'd hate to harm you, but you've jumped the fence of your own accord, and I'm going to be boss or—"

"Pap! I say, pap!"

"Pap may hear, but he can't answer, Polly," said Bantam Bob, one hand closing with gentle pressure on the back of her neck, the other significantly boring a pistol-muzzle against her spinal-column the while. "But, pap or no pap, I've got you too snug for any sort of use! Be smart, and acknowledge as much, my dear girl, can't you?"

Lightly though those words came, she who heard them must have detected the stern resolution underlying all, for she made no effort to shake off that hardly caressing touch, or to writhe away from that cold muzzle at her back.

"I'll kill you for this, you little runt!" she said, almost growlingly.

"Not if you force me to kill you first, Polly," came the easy retort. "Will you elevate those pretty dukes of yours, my dear? Do it, and do it straight, just to prevent mournful accidents, please!"

It must have been a bitter pill to swallow, but Polly was one out of a thousand, and knowing how completely she was held at his mercy, she made the best of a bad bargain, lifting her arms as directed.

"Sorry for your wardrobe, Polly," added Bantam Bob, calling the knife into play once more, using it to cut away the hem of the woman's dress, "but I'd be worse than a fool to trust you too far. Now, bring your arms down and backward, very peacefully, too, I beg of you!"

Polly obeyed, simply because she could think of nothing better. After the treatment this man had received at her hands, he was hardly one to stand on trifles, just then. And when her wrists were securely bound together, Bantam Bob spoke again:

"I rather think you've begun to suspect as much, Polly, and so I'll frankly confess that, first, I'm a detective, sent down here by Governor Toole to ferret out this gang of Steer Buccaneers; second, that I know that you and your father are members of that gang; third, that you two stole Miss Marshall. Now, will you show me where she is confined, or must I waste time in pinching you or your father?"

"Where is pap, first?" hesitated Polly, a little catch in her voice.

"Right where you left me, a couple of hours or more ago," and Bantam Bob struck a match, the brief glow revealing father and daughter to each other.

Polly asked no questions, just then, for the explanation was sufficiently clear to one with her acute wits. The tables were turned, with a vengeance, and all was lost, unless— Could she keep this cunning little imp fully employed until outside aid could come to them?

"Which is it, Polly?" urged Bantam Bob. "Will you play sensible and make the best of it, or must I turn Injun for a few minutes?"

"If I do that, will you let us go free? Pap and I?"

"I'm asking the questions, and your part is to answer them, my dear woman," blandly retorted the little detective. "Will you show me where Miss Marshall is stowed away, I repeat?"

"Yes," coldly answered Polly, turning toward the entrance. "When you see her, ask her if I've not treated her as gently as possible, and if I did not swear she should go free, unharmed in the least."

"Talk is mighty cheap, Polly, but action says a mighty sight more for the same amount of money," drily retorted the Beauty, keeping close beside the fair Amazon as they passed out of the cave. "And I'm talking straight when I say that any attempt at trickery on your part, will surely bring one of us to grief; and that one will not be me!"

"Spare your threats, sir," coldly spoke the woman. "If I wasn't perfectly willing to lead, all you might say or do couldn't even begin to drive me."

Bantam Bob made no reply to this speech, but a quiet smile crept into his odd face. He was holding Polly by an arm, and the quivering of that firm flesh beneath his touch, told him a far different tale.

Although outwardly so cold, so hard, so fearless, in secret she was consumed by terror, and he stowed that discovery away for possible use in the near future.

The little gulch-like valley was perfectly still and peaceful. Not another human shape was to be seen, and no sound arose to warn them of coming trouble to either.

Evidently Polly had no hope of a speedy arrival so far as friends of hers was concerned, for she did not even cast a glance around them, but led the way direct to the little den in which Edith Marshall had been hidden for the time being.

"She's in yonder," Polly said, pausing in front of the spot.

"You go in first, then I'll find a couple of you," blandly said the little detective, giving his captive a gentle push. "Ladies have precedence, was one of my earliest copies, dear Polly!"

He entered close at her heels, and although the fading light obscured all objects, there remained sufficient to show him a bound figure lying upon that rude pallet. And then, with a sobbing cry, Edith Marshall made herself known, even as she begged for liberty.

Forcing Polly to pass to the very rear of the dingy den, Bantam Bob quickly set Edith at liberty, and almost her first thought was of the man whom she was to have married, and whom, despite all that had been said against him, she still loved far better than life itself.

"Make her tell where he is hidden!" she panted, almost hysterically. "I saw him—bound, gagged, so—make her tell, dear sir, I beg of you—on my knees, I beg!"

But Bantam Bob gently hindered that action, his strong arm lending the poor girl much needed support in her intense agitation. He begged her to be calm, that all should be done to meet her wishes.

Edith, warned that she was wasting precious time by giving way to such wild excitement, nobly strove to calm her nerves, and having succeeded far better than the little detective dared hope for, he put his fair captive to the question once more.

"I don't know—and if I *did*, why should I tell her about my lawful husband?" she cried, desperately. "Hasn't he worked enough harm already? Hasn't he—"

"Easy, dear Polly," blandly interposed Bantam Bob, yet with a touch of stern resolution, which she was not too badly frightened to catch and fully understand. "Don't set up as a champion liar, at this late stage of the game. I know—well, too mighty much for even your sweet tongue to put blinkers over my two eyes."

"She heard and saw—let her deny that, if she can!"

"Lies, all lies!" passionately cried Edith, her faith still strong as her love. "He was forced to say it—if he did utter those horrible words! Make her confess, dear sir! Make her tell where he is hidden, my love, my almost husband!"

"Is it tell, or suffer, Polly?" coldly demanded Bantam Bob. "I know that Julius Payne is innocent, and so do you. Now, own up everything, or I'll get at the truth by torturing both you and your father!"

At that stern threat Polly broke down, and in trembling voice made full confession, after appealingly uttering:

"If I confess, will you let us go free? He'd kill us if I sold him out, and—may we go free, then?"

"First prove yourself deserving, Polly, and I'll hardly forget that I owe my life to you two," said Bantam Bob, in milder tones. "Who is the real chief of the Steer Buccaneers, in these parts, first?"

"I'll die before I tell you that, but—Payne is not, and that warrant was a trumped-up charge, so far as he is concerned. And this bit of work—must I tell that, sir?"

"Julius—where is he?" almost fiercely demanded Edith, before Bantam Bob could reply. "Take me to him, or I'll—I'll scratch your eyes out!"

That truly feminine threat checked the question which was rising in the little detective's throat, and grasping Polly by an arm, he urged

her from the little cave, bidding her obey, under penalty.

"There's mischief in the air, and I know it!" he said, with an uneasy glance around, though the gloom was thickening rapidly, and he had but a limited range of vision. "Quick, girl! I'd hate to treat you harshly, after owing a life to you and your father, but—you've got to knuckle clean down, so why not make the best of it, first off?"

"I will, I am," huskily responded the woman, turning toward another part of the rocky wall. "I'll trust to your manhood for pay, and I'll do all that lies in my power to straighten things out. I never entered it with good or free will. I was forced—"

"Of course you did, Polly, but business first, explanations later. Where have you stowed Payne away?"

"Right in yonder," declared the woman, with an indicating nod of the head, since she was deprived of her power of pointing with hands.

With a low, sobbing cry, Edith sprang ahead, into the dark opening before them, and an instant after she vanished from their sight, her glad yet sobbing cry came back; for she was with her loved one!

Instead of following after, Bantam Bob grasped Polly, muttering:

"Hark! what does that noise mean, woman?"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

TWO LIVES FOR ONE.

COMING from the southwest, beyond the dark rocks which he knew shut off all view of the Old Station from where they then stood, were the fierce shouts, oaths and calls of white men.

Polly trembled and shrunk away, and it was not until Bantam Bob altered his question a little, that she could find a reply.

"What is it, woman? Part of the devilish trick you've been playing?"

"Yes—no—let us go, or we'll be murdered like—you said we might go free, if I told all!"

Brief though the distance was, that natural barrier went far toward deadening sounds, and listen as he might, Bantam Bob could catch no word from all these fierce cries, by which to guide his actions. He could give a fair guess as to its meaning, but with so much at stake, he dared not take any long chances.

"Stay right here, Polly," he said, quickly. "If you trust me, maybe I'll trust you, in the end. Don't run away, or I'll leave you to take the consequences."

Without pausing for an answer, or to explain his meaning more clearly, Bantam Bob sprang up the slope, entering the little cave in which Julius Payne had been stowed away for the time being, and where he found Edith Marshall trying to remove his bonds.

"Just me, friends," he declared, giving all the benefit of a lighted match. "More than glad to see you, pardner! Miss Marshall, here's my knife; set him free, please. Payne, I'll leave this gun for you, when you are able to handle it. Only, don't pop me over when I come back!"

"God bless you, man! I thought— Edith, it's all lies! I'm not—I never was—"

"Hate to chip in, Payne, but I wish you'd promise me, sacredly, that neither of you will leave this spot before I get back? Trouble outside, I'm afraid, but if you'll follow orders, we'll come off, top-side up!"

Without waiting for an answer, for he knew that would call for still further explanation, and time was very precious just then, the Beauty from Butte left that gloomy den, hastening back to the side of Polly Hucks.

"Come, my girl, we'll go see to your father."

"You'll not—you'll let us run, before they can make a way in here?"

"Would your risk be so mighty great, Polly, even if they should find you here?" asked Bantam Bob, a touch of suspicious doubt in his tones.

"He'd—they'd kill us, sure!"

"The boss would, you mean, Polly? Who is he, anyway?"

The woman gave a shivering moan, but that was all. And as he looked more closely into her face, the little detective knew he need not hope for further enlightenment on that point from Polly Hucks.

Together they hurried to the dark hole where Old Nate had so unexpectedly to himself changed places with the Beauty, and lighting the old grain-sack with a match, to cast a brief light on their faces, Bantam Bob removed that gag, then asked Nathan Hucks the same question he had put to the young woman.

"Don't—for your life, pap, don't peach!"

"See him double-durned fu'st, an' then I won't!"

For a brief space the detective paused, in doubt, but as his memory reverted to that other night-scene, when the helping hands of these two people surely saved him from death, his stern will weakened, and he said:

"All right! I reckon I can hit the truth without further help than you have already given me, so—steady, pap!"

Using the knife which had been in the belt of arms taken from Polly Hucks, he cut Old Nate's

bonds, bidding him rise and follow them into the open air. Once there, they noticed a red glow rising above the rocks, and they readily divined the cause.

"Burnin' the shebang, Polly! Ef it ketches—We've got to skin out o' this, or—"

Bantam Bob handed Polly her weapons, gravely saying:

"I think you're too nearly white to attempt to use them against a friend, Polly, for that's what I am, law or no law. You saved my life, I give you both a chance for yours. Can you get away from here, without the certainty of being caught?"

"Kin we try?" eagerly asked Old Nate. "Honest Injun, no dirt?"

"So far as I am concerned, yes. I know at least part of yonder gang is composed of friends and allies of yours, but—"

"They'd hang us, too mighty sudden!" said Polly in deeply affected tones, her hand clasping his for a moment. "I thank you, sir! I wish I might say—Pap! Rack out, or we'll never get started!"

Father and daughter rushed away, heading up the narrow valley, leaving the little detective watching them for a brief space, then muttering lowly as he faced toward the den where the lovers had been left in company:

"I'd ought to have pinched 'em, while I had the chance. They'd make it all close up so much easier. But—well, if a man can't play he's human, once in a while, what's the use of living?"

As Bantam Bob reached the place where Julius Payne had been set free, he paused for another glance in the direction taken by Polly and Old Nate. He caught the indistinct sound of horses' hoofs, and a grim smile came into his face.

"They've got off, and with a fair start—well, luck attend them, if only for Polly's sake! If that girl had only a fair chance to—whoa-up, old man!"

Cutting himself short, Bantam Bob spoke loudly enough to attract the notice of the reunited lovers, and they quickly emerged from the little cave, into the outer air. Edith gave a start and a faint cry as she noticed that lurid glow, shrinking visibly as she caught the sounds of fierce, vengeful shouts and yells coming from the same point.

"Is it—friends or enemies, sir?" asked Julius Payne, his arm protectingly closing about Edith.

"A mixture of both, if the whole truth was known, I reckon," came the quick response. "Now, one question to both of you: are you afraid to trust me, even though I may ask rather blind obedience?"

Payne hesitated, but not so Edith. With extended hands, she said:

"With our lives, dear sir! Haven't you given us better than life? Only for you, those terrible people—oh, where are they, now?"

"Beyond harming you, Miss Marshall," quickly answered Bantam Bob, as Edith shrunk back in sudden terror, to find comfort and support combined in the strong arm of her lover. "I believe I acted in the wisest manner, there, as I know I'm acting for the best when I beg you both to trust me blindly during the next hour or two. Will you agree to do so much, Payne?"

"You are not—what are you, first?"

"A detective, sent down here by Governor Toole in hopes of breaking up the Steer Buccaneers. With your help, I believe I can do just that very thing! Now—will you chip in, pardner?"

"Yes!" answered Edith, for both herself and lover. "We surely owe you so much, and—you will, Julius?"

"Gladly, since you ask it, Edith. Now, what comes first?" turning to the little detective.

"A bit of pretty tough climbing, for one thing, but I reckon we can turn the trick, in time. I've got an idea—let's chase it, friends!"

Those keen eyes had not been idle while their owner was reaching an understanding with the lovers, and now Bantam Bob led the way, climbing up over the rocks, their labor greatly lessened by the red glow which came from the Old Station and its surroundings.

Still, the task was a difficult one, and Edith required much help before she could surmount those obstacles. Such assistance Julius Payne was only too willing to lend her, and when called upon, Bantam Bob was never lacking.

At length they gained a point from whence they could catch a fair view of the blazing ruins, and as Edith recognized the burly figure of her father among those people, only the ready palm of the detective hindered a cry which might have resulted in their discovery by the rescuing party.

"Your pledge, Miss Marshall," he hastily whispered. "If they see us now, they'll surely kill Mr. Payne! For his sake—"

That was more than sufficient, and clinging to her lover, Edith almost held her breath during the remainder of that perilous and arduous crossing.

Not until level ground was struck, did Bantam Bob say more, but then he gave a further inkling of his plans.

"First thing is to get safely back to the Spec-

tacle, without being seen or suspected by yonder crowd. That's easy enough, if you'll only fall in with my way; will you?"

Assent was instantly given, and Bantam Bob led the way, once more.

His eyes had served him well while upon the rocks, and making a circuit, wide enough to prevent observation from those gathered near the now ruined Station, he conducted the lovers to the spot where the rescuing party had left their horses, and only taking time sufficient to make sure no horse-guard had been left on duty, he selected three of the best animals, leading them cautiously away until he felt it would be safe for them to mount.

"It'll give them something to puzzle over," he chuckled, as they rode off in company. "Well, it's not stealing, simply borrowing!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

BY HIS OWN HAND.

THAT party had ample food for thought, without troubling their busy brains over the strange disappearance of those three horses, when slowly making their way back toward the Spectacle Ranch.

True, they had not found the maiden whom they had set forth to rescue, nor had they seen aught of those beings toward whom strong suspicion pointed as the kidnappers, but they had made a discovery even more strange, if not quite so dearly desired.

In their hot rage and fierce disappointment at finding the Old Station deserted, its destruction was determined upon, and the torch applied.

From the house itself, the flames spread to the dilapidated outbuildings, and Paul Chapman, seemingly beside himself, extended the fire to the rude, tumble-down stables as well.

The fire burned long and furiously, but in the end, the masked entrance to the passage leading through the eternal rocks was laid bare, and the first step toward solving so many mysteries was taken.

As soon as possible—and the free use of water brought from the adjacent spring hastened that end greatly—the search-party forced their way through that passage, emerging into the narrow valley, with growing amazement and increasing hopes.

"Scatter and search!" commanded Chapman, pistol in hand as he set the good example. "They may be hiding—Edith! Miss Marshall! Friends, coming to save—oh, Edith Marshall!"

Only the echoes of his own voice came back to him, but his eager anticipation caught the rest of the company, and hot, swift search was made among the rocks, resulting in more discoveries than one, even if she for whom they sought was not to be found there.

Among other things, recently severed cords were discovered in no less than three different dens, thus proving beyond a doubt that the valley had been recently occupied, and almost as surely by both friends and enemies.

Still other points were noted, and little by little the veil of mystery which had for so long hung over the success of the Steer Buccaneers was rent apart, never more to perplex honest brains!

"And the whole of it going on right under our very noses, too!" exploded Whitlow, in supreme disgust, as tools for altering brands were unearthed in almost endless quantities. "To think of it! Who'll take good wages for kicking me all over a quarter section?"

But the discovery in which Dexter Marshall and Paul Chapman felt sorely interested, failed to take place, and as the morning sun rose high enough to cast its rays into the valley so long kept secret from all outsiders, they reluctantly abandoned their vain quest, and in company with the others, turned their faces once more toward the Spectacle Ranch.

The fact that three horses were missing, caused some little excitement, for at first it was thought possible their game might have doubled upon them, after that manner; but as their tracks were quickly found, heading toward the Spectacle Ranch, that idea was abandoned. In all probability the carelessly-hitched animals had freed themselves and struck out for another feed.

In anything but a hilarious mood, the rescuing party came in sight of the Marshall home, and when only a short distance off, were electrified by the sight of Mrs. Marshall and Edith, standing in the front door, joyously waving them both greeting and welcome!

With a glad shout, Dexter Marshall spurred forward, Paul Chapman close at his heels.

The rancher followed his women as they retreated into the house, but Chapman paused at the threshold, a fierce imprecation bursting from his lips as he caught sight of Bantam Bob and Julius Payne!

"Surrender!" cried the Bantam, springing forward, but Chapman jerked out a pistol and tried to cover his rival; only to have his hand knocked up by the little detective, sending the lead into the ceiling.

A short, fierce struggle ensued, ending in a

fall for both, and a second explosion from Chapman's weapon.

That ended the struggle, for the rancher lay shivering, groaning, helpless, with a bullet through his lungs!

He whom all present had known only as Paul Chapman, died before the next setting of the sun, but, ere that ending came, he had made full and free confession, clearing away all mists, all lies, all misunderstandings.

He had been the head of the Steer Buccaneers, so far as that section was concerned. And to him belonged the crimes which had so audaciously been brought against Julius Payne.

Nathan Hucks was his father, and Polly was his sister! They had been won over to play their part in his daring schemes, part of which was to win Edith Marshall as his wife, and through her become owner of the rich Spectacle Ranch.

In order to bring this about, Julius Payne must be disposed of. He was to be publicly branded as chief of the Steer Buccaneers, and the more surely to damn him in the eyes of his honest friends, that false accusation of murder was brought, based on a crime actually committed by Chapman himself.

From start to finish, all was carefully planned. Billy Jacks was a willing tool, as was Stevens, the cowboy who brought a report of rustling, that night. Only the Bantam was playing an independent part, and mainly through his unremitting efforts had disaster overtaken the vile schemers.

Kenmuir was simply doing his sworn duty in serving that warrant. He was to be robbed of his prisoner, the more surely to fasten suspicion upon Payne. Chapman played the part, in disguise, at the false show of lynching, his make-up being such as to make Kenmuir believe him the rescued prisoner.

Instead, Payne was taken away, still ironed, and placed in the Old Station, whither Edith Marshall had been conveyed. Paul Chapman, stealing away from the hunt for sign, hastened there, and taking the voice of the lound and gagged man, tried to deceive Edith, as detailed. When her cry broke forth, a fictitious struggle followed, then Chapman hurried away, to make himself conspicuous at the questioning of Billy Jacks.

That, too, was part of the deep-laid plan, and right well did the cowboy play his part, yielding only when his life seemed in peril.

Meanwhile, Polly and Old Nate were to play their part: were to take Edith to the secret valley, and leave her bound just as they did. Then they were finally to dispose of Julius Payne, in a spot already selected, which would almost certainly defy detection. Killed, buried, he was to be regarded by all honest people as a fugitive from that section.

Polly and her father were to flee, and when excitement cooled down a bit, were to put in a claim for the Pea-vine Ranch, based on papers which Billy Jacks had stolen when left alone on the place, the evening of the wedding.

Only the appearance of the little detective prevented their part of the plot being consummated; but he surely would have shared the fate of Julius Payne, only for his freeing himself, and capturing Old Nate, in turn.

With Julius Payne out of the way, Paul Chapman felt that in good time he could surely win Edith to become his wife, and then, rich enough to satisfy his utmost wishes, he would settle down to a quiet, respectable life for the remainder of his days.

But it was not to be! By his own hand came his punishment, and as the day waned, so his strength faded, and before the sun sunk to rest, his last breath was given.

There is not much more to say, for the reader can readily pick up the few stray threads, if he or she thinks it worth the trouble.

Robert Armstrong—not Kimberly, as he had once given his name—came out in his true colors, and when his cunningly adjusted false nose was removed, he really presented a fair appearance. Odd, of course, but by no means ugly in looks.

He had made a pretty accurate list of the Steer Buccaneers living in that section, and while a few of them made their escape, enough were arrested and brought to justice, to effectually rid that vicinity of the lawless element.

His name cleared from all shame, Julius Payne claimed his just reward, and Edith gladly gave it him. They were married that same week, and up to date neither one has seen cause to regret that action.

Polly and Old Nate got away, and were lost to sight, neither of them being heard of, after that night.

"Bantam Bob" is still in harness, for, while the Steer Buccaneers were broken up, as a band, in that section, they still flourished in other parts of the State, as frequent items in the newspapers attested.

THE END.

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650 Lucky Lester's Lone Hand.
634 Old Handcart's Big Dump.
622 The All Around Sports.
603 Desert Alf, the Man With the Cougar.
590 Gentle Jack, the High Roller from Humbug.
578 Seven Shot Steve, the Sport with a Smile.
568 The Dude Detective.
558 Hurrah Harry, the High Horse from Halcyon.
549 Belshazzar Brick, the Bailiff of Blue Blazes.
539 Oregon, the Sport With a Scar.
525 Fresh Frank, the Derringer Daisy.
503 The Dude from Denver.
478 Pinnacle Pete; or, The Fool from Way Back.
459 Major Sunshine, the Man of Three Lives.
429 Hair Trigger Tom of Red Bend.
402 Snapshot Sam; or, The Angels' Flat Racket.
396 The Piper Detective; or, The Gilt Edge Gang.
375 Royal George, the Three in One.
358 Three Handsome Sports; or, The Combination.
344 Double Shot Dave of the Left Hand.
333 Derringer Dick, the Man with the Drop.
300 A Sport in Spectacles; or, Bad Time at Bunco.
268 Magic Mike, the Man of Frills.
229 Captain Cutsleeve; or, The Little Sport.
314 The Two Cool Sports; or, Gertie of the Gulch.
192 The Lightning Sport.
182 Hands Up; or, The Knights of the Canyon.
160 Soft Hand, Sharp; or, The Man with the Sand.
145 Pistol Pards; or, The Silent Sport from Cinnabar.

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- 614 The Showman Detective; or, The Mad Magician.
309 The Texas Tramp; or, Solid Saul.
445 Journeyman John, the Champion.
412 Larry Locke, the Man of Iron.
406 Old Pop Hicks, Showman.
378 John Armstrong, Mechanic.
326 The Whitest Man in the Mines.
310 The Marshal of Satanstown; or, The League.
303 Top-Notch Tom, the Cowboy Outlaw.
295 Old Cross-Eye, the Maverick-Hunter.
290 The Lost Corvette; or, Blakeley's Last Cruise.
284 The Three Frigates; or, Old Ironsides' Revenge.
277 The Saucy Jane, Privateer.
272 Seth Slocum, Railroad Surveyor.
265 Old Double-Sword; or, Pilots and Pirates.
253 A Yankee Cossack; or, The Queen of the Nihilists.
247 Alligator Ike; or, The Secret of the Everglade.
242 The Fog Devil; or, The Skipper of the Flash.
230 The Flying Dutchman of 1880.
226 The Mad Hussars; or, The O's and the Mac's.
215 Parson Jim, King of the Cowboys.
211 Colonel Plunger; or, The Unknown Sport.
206 One Eye, the Cannoneer.
193 The Man in Red; or, The Ghost of the Old Guard.
187 The Death's Head Cuirassiers.
174 The Phantom Knights.
159 Red Rudiger, the Archer.
132 Nemo, King of the Tramps.
115 The Severed Head; or, The Castle Coucy Secret.
108 The Duke of Diamonds.
98 The Rock Rider; or, The Spirit of the Sierra.
96 Double Death; or, The Spy of Wyoming.
69 The Irish Captain. A Tale of Fontenoy.
65 The Red Rajah; or, The Scourge of the Indies.
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- 319 Kit Bandy & Co., the Border Detectives.
148 One-Armed Alf, the Giant Hunter.
137 Long Beard, the Giant Spy.
99 The Giant Rifleman; or, Wild Camp Life.
51 Red Rob, the Boy Road-Agent.
48 Idaho Tom, the Young Outlaw of Silverland.
46 Bowie-Knife Ben, the Nor'west Hunter.
44 Old Dan Rackback, the Great Exterminator.
43 Dakota Dan, the Reckless Ranger.
7 Death-Notch, the Destroyer.

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567 Captain Midnight, the Man of Craft.
544 The Back to Back Pards.
522 The Champion Three.
502 Bareback Buck, the Centaur of the Plains.
472 Six Foot Si; or, The Man to "Tie To."
431 California Kit, the Always on Hand.
404 Silver Sid; or, A "Daisy" Bluff.
380 Tiger Dick's Pledge; or, The Golden Serpent.
359 Yellow Jack, the Mestizo.
338 Jack Sands, the Boss of the Town.
299 Three of a Kind; or, Dick, Despard and the Sport.
280 Tiger Dick's Lone Hand.
251 Tiger Dick vs. Iron Despard.
207 Old Hard Head; or, Whirlwind and his Mare.
171 Tiger Dick, the Man of the Iron Heart.
114 The Gentleman from Pike.
80 A Man of Nerve; or, Caliban the Dwarf.
54 Always on Hand; or, The Foot-Hills Sport.
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484 Captain Ready, the Red Ransomer.
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456 The Demon Steer.
428 The Flying Glim; or, The Island Lure.

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118 The Burglar Captain; or, The Fallen Star.
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580 Cop Colt, the Quaker City Detective.

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- 684 Velvet Van, the Mystery Shadower.
678 The Dude Desperado.
671 Jason Clew, the Silk-Handed Ferret.
664 Monk Morel, the Man-Hunter.
654 Sol Sphinx, the Ferret Detective.
642 Red Pard and Yellow.
608 Silent Sam, the Shadow Sphinx.
592 Captain Sid, the Shasta Ferret.
579 Old Cormorant, the Bowery Shadow.
569 Captain Cobra, the Hooded Mystery.
559 Danton, the Shadow Sharp.
550 Silk Hand, the Mohave Ferret.
543 The Magnate Detective.
532 Jack Javert, the Independent Detective.
523 Reynard of Red Jack; or, The Lost Detective.
512 Captain Velvet's Big Stake.
505 Phil Fox, the Genteel Spotter.
496 Richard Redfire, the Two Worlds' Detective.
487 Sunshine Sam, a Chip of the Old Block.
480 Hawkspare, the Man with a Secret.
468 Coldgrip in Deadwood.
460 Captain Coldgrip, the Detective.
453 Captain Coldgrip's Long Trail.
447 Voicano, the Frisco Spy.
441 The California Sharp.
434 Lucifer Lynx, the Wonder Detective.
421 Father Ferret, the Frisco Shadow.
413 Captain Coldgrip in New York.
407 Captain Coldgrip's Nerve; or, Injun Nick.
400 Captain Coldgrip; or, The New York Spotter.
392 The Lost Bonanza; or, The Boot of Silent Hound.
382 The Bonanza Band; or, Dread Don of Cool Clan.
374 Major Blister, the Sport of Two Cities.
365 Keen Kennard, the Shasta Shadow.
352 The Desperate Dozen.
347 Denver Duke, the Man with "Sand."
340 Cool Conrad, the Dakota Detective.
335 Flash Dan, the Nabob; or, Blades of Bowie Bar.
321 California Claude, the Lone Bandit.
294 Broadcloth Burt, the Denver Dandy.
278 Hercules Goldspur, the Man of the Velvet Hand.

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- 689 The Sparkler Sharp.
676 Hurricane Hal, the Cowboy Hotspur.
669 Old True Blue, the Trusty.
663 The Giant Sport; or, Sold to Satan.
656 Old Plug Ugly, the Rough and Ready.
648 Gold Glove Gid, the Man of Grit.
641 Aztec Jack, the Desert Nomad.
631 Colonel Cool, the Santa Fe Sharp.
602 Captain Nameless, the Mountain Mystery.
571 Old Dismal, the Range Detective.
545 Hustler Harry, the Cowboy Sport.

BY CAPTAIN MARK WILTON.

- 323 Hotspur Hugh; or, The Banded Brothers.
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305 Silver-Plated Sol, the Montana Rover.
291 Horseshoe Hank, the Man of Big Luck.
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276 Texa; Chick, the Southwest Detective.
271 Stonefist, of Big Nugget Bend.
266 Leopard Luke, the King of Horse-Thieves.
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258 Bullet Head, the Colorado Bravo.
245 Barranca Bill, the Revolver Champion.
237 Long-Haired Max; or, The Black League.
227 Buckshot Ben, the Man-Hunter of Idaho.
223 Canyon Dave, the Man of the Mountain.
219 The Scorpion Brothers; or, Mad Tom's Mission.
202 Cactus Jack, the Giant Guide.
194 Don Sombrero, the California Road Gent.
176 Lady Jaguar, the Robber Queen.

BY SAM S. HALL—"Buckskin Sam."

- 511 Paint Pete, the Prairie Patrol.
371 Gold Buttons; or, The Up Range Pards.
358 The Prince of Pan Out.
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328 King Kent; or, The Bandits of the Basin.
322 The Crimson Coyotes; or, Nita, the Nemesis.
309 Raybold, the Rattling Ranger.
301 Bowlder Bill; or, The Man from Taos.
293 Stampede Steve; or, The Doom of the Double.
287 Dandy Dave and his Horse, White Stocking.
282 The Merciless Marauders; or, Carl's Revenge.
273 Mountain Mose, the Gorge Outlaw.
269 The Bayou Bravo; or, The Terrible Trail.
264 The Crooked Three.
256 Double Dan, the Dastard; or, The Pirates.
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244 Merciless Mart, the Man Tiger of Missouri.
239 The Terrible Trio; or, The Angel of the Army.
235 Rocky Mountain Al; or, The Waif of the Range.
221 Desperate Duke, the Guadalupe "Galoot."
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212 The Brazos Tigers; or, The Minute Men.
204 Big Foot Wallace, the King of the Lariat.
199 Diamond Dick, the Dandy from Denver.
191 The Lone Star Gambler; or, Magnolia's Maid.
181 The Terrible Tonkaway; or, Old Rocky's Pards.
186 The Black Bravo; or, The Tonkaway's Triumph.
178 Dark Dashwood, the Desperate.
90 Wild Will, the Mad Ranchero.
3 Kit Carson, Jr., the Crack Shot.

BY MAJOR DANGERFIELD BURR.

- 448 Hark Kenton, the Traitor.
188 The Phantom Mazeppa; or, The Hyena.
156 Velvet Face, the Border Bravo.
143 Captain Crimson, the Man of the Iron Face.
117 Dashing Dandy; or, The Hotspur of the Hills.
92 Buffalo Bill, the Buckskin King.

BY COL. THOMAS H. MONSTERY.

- 332 Spring-Heel Jack; or, The Masked Mystery.
262 Fighting Tom, the Terror of the Troughs.
236 Champion Sam; or, The Monarchs of the Show.
169 Corporal Cannon, the Man of Forty Duels.
157 Mourad, the Mameluke; or, The Three Sword masters.
150 El Rubio Bravo, King of the Swordsmen.
143 The Czar's Spy; or, The Nihilist League.
126 The Demon Duelist; or, The League of Steel.
82 Iron Wrist, the Swordmaster.

BY NED BUNTLIN.

- 657 Long Tom, the Privateer.
633 The Sea Spy.
621 The Red Privateer; or, The Midshipman Reven.
584 Fire Feather, the Buccaneer King.
517 Buffalo Bill's First Trail.
361 Tombstone Dick, the Train Pilot.
270 Andros, the Rover; or, The Pirate's Daughter.
122 Saul Sabberday, the Idiot Spy.
111 The Smuggler Captain; or, The Skipper's Crime.
61 Captain Seawolf, the Privateer.
23 The Red Warrior; or, The Comanche Lover.
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16 The White Wizard; or, The Seminole Prophet.
14 Thayendanagea, the Scourge; or, The War-Eagle.

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- 433 Flush Fred, the River Sharp.
368 The Canyon King; or, a Price on his Head.
348 Dan Dillon, King of Crosscut.
337 Old Gabe, the Mountain Tramp.
327 Terrapin Dick, the Wildwood Detective.
315 Flush Fred's Double; or, The Squatters' League.
308 Hemlock Hank, Tough and True.
298 Logger Lem; or, Life in the Pine Woods.
289 Flush Fred's Full Hand.
274 Flush Fred, the Mississippi Sport.
248 Montana Nat, the Lion of Last Chance Camp.
222 Bill the Blizzard; or, Red Jack's Crime.
209 Buck Farley, the Bonanza Prince.
129 Mississippi Mose; or, a Strong Man's Sacrifice.

BY CAPTAIN MAYNE REID.

- 267 The White Squaw.
234 The Hunter's Feast.
228 The Maroon. A Tale of Voodoo and Obeah.
218 The Wild Huntress; or, The Squatter.
213 The War Trail; or, The Hunt of the Wild Horse.
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200 The Rifle Rangers; or, Adventures in Mexico.
74 The Captain of the Rifles; or, The Lake Queen.
66 The Specter Barque. A Tale of the Pacific.
55 The Scalp Hunters. A Romance of the Plains.
12 The Death-Shot; or, Tracked to Death.
8 The Headless Horseman.

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- 690 The Matchless Detective.
680 XX, the Fatal Clew.

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- 643 Castlemaine, the Silent Sifter.
616 Magnus, the Weird Detective.
606 The Drop Detective.
595 Wellborn, the Upper Crust Detective.
582 Joram, the Detective Expert.
574 Old Falcon's Double.
561 The Thug King; or, The Falcon Detective's Fee.
548 Falconbridge, the Sphinx Detective.
536 Old Falcon's Fee; or, The Detective's Swell Job.
515 Short-Stop Maje, the Diamond Field Detective.
509 Old Falcon, the Thunderbolt Detective.
501 Springsteel Steve, the Retired Detective.
494 The Detective's Spy.
485 Rowlock, the Harbor Detective.
477 Dead-arm Brandt.
467 Mainwaring, the Salamander.
462 The Circus Detective.
451 Griplock, the Rocket Detective.
444 The Magic Detective; or, The Hidden Hand.
424 Hawk Heron's Deputy.
386 Hawk Heron, the Falcon Detective.

BY COLONEL DELLE SARA.

- 106 Shamus O'Brien, the Bould Boy of Glingal.
87 The Scarlet Captain; or, Prisoner of the Tower.
53 Silver Sam; or, The Mystery of Deadwood City.

MISCELLANEOUS.

- 566 The Dauntless Detective; or, The Daughter Avenger. By Tom W. King.
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312 Kinkfoot Karl, the Mountain Scourge. By Morris Redwing.
275 The Smuggler Cutter. By J. D. Conroy.
261 Black Sam, the Prairie Thunderbolt. By Col. Jo Yards.
190 The Three Guardsmen. By Alexander Dumas.
179 Conrad, the Convict. By Prof. Gildersleeve.
166 Owlet, the Robber Prince. By S. R. Urban.
158 The Doomed Dozen. By Dr. Frank Powell.
152 Captain Ironnerve, the Counterfeiter Chief.
146 The Doctor Detective. By George Lemuel.
144 The Hunchback of Notre Dame. By Victor Hugo.
140 The Three Spaniards. By Geo. Walker.
133 Rody the Rover. By William Carleton.
125 The Blacksmith Outlaw. By H. Ainsworth.
110 The Silent Rifleman. By H. W. Herbert.
102 The Masked Band. By George L. Aiken.
78 The Mysterious Spy. By Arthur M. Grainger.
76 The Queen's Musketeers. By George Albany.
68 The Fighting Trapper. By Capt. J. F. C. Adams.
60 Wide Awake, the Robber King. By F. Dumond.
32 B'hoys of Yale; or, The Scrapes of Collegians.
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- 553 Mark Monte, the Mutineer; or, The Branded Brig.
- 546 The Doomed Whaler; or, The Life Wreck.
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- 524 The Sea Chaser; or, The Pirate Noble.
- 516 Chatard, the Dead-Shot Duelist.
- 510 El Moro, the Corsair Commodore.
- 493 The Scouts of the Sea.
- 489 The Pirate Hunter; or, The Ocean Rivals.
- 482 Ocean Tramps; or, The Desperadoes of the Deep.
- 476 Bob Brent, the Buccaneer; or, the Red Sea Raider.
- 469 The Lieutenant Detective; or, the Fugitive Sailor.
- 457 The Sea Insurgent; or, The Conspirator Son.
- 446 Ocean Ogre, the Outcast Corsair.
- 435 The One-Armed Buccaneer.
- 430 The Fatal Frigate; or, Rivals in Love and War.
- 425 The Sea Sword; or, The Ocean Rivals.
- 418 The Sea Siren; or, The Fugitive Privateer.
- 399 The New Monte Cristo.
- 393 The Convict Captain.
- 388 The Giant Buccaneer; or, The Wrecker Witch.
- 377 Afloat and Ashore; or, The Corsair Conspirator.
- 373 Sailor of Fortune; or, The Barneget Buccaneer.
- 369 The Coast Corsair; or, The Siren of the Sea.
- 364 The Sea Fugitive; or, The Queen of the Coast.
- 346 Ocean Guerrillas; or, Phantom Midshipman.
- 341 The Sea Desperado.
- 336 The Magic Ship; or, Sandy Hook Freebooters.
- 335 The Gentleman Pirate; or, The Casco Hermit.
- 318 The Indian Buccaneer; or, The Red Rovers.
- 307 The Phantom Pirate; or, The Water Wolves.
- 291 The Sea Owl; or, The Lady Captain of the Gulf.
- 259 Outlaw and Cross; or, the Ghouls of the Sea.
- 253 The Pirate Priest; or, The Gambler's Daughter.
- 246 Queen Helen, the Amazon of the Overland.
- 235 Red Lightning the Man of Chance.
- 231 The Kid Glove Miner; or, The Magic Doctor.
- 224 Black Beard, the Buccaneer.
- 220 The Specter Yacht; or, A Brother's Crime.
- 216 The Corsair Planter; or, Driven to Doom.
- 210 Buccaneer Bess, the Lioness of the Sea.
- 205 The Gambler Pirate; or, Lady of the Lagoon.
- 198 The Skeleton Schooner; or, The Skimmer.
- 164 The Ocean Vampire; or, The Castle Heiress.
- 181 The Scarlet Schooner; or, The Sea Nemesis.
- 177 Don Diablo, the Planter-Corsair.
- 172 Black Pirate; or, The Golden Fetters Mystery.
- 162 The Mad Mariner; or, Dishonored and Disowned.
- 155 The Corsair Queen; or, The Gypsies of the Sea.
- 147 Gold Spur, the Gentleman from Texas.
- 139 Fire Eye; or, The Bride of a Buccaneer.
- 134 Darkey Dan, the Colored Detective.
- 131 Buckskin Sam, the Texas Traller.
- 128 The Chevalier Corsair; or, The Heritage.
- 121 The Sea Cadet; or, The Rover of the Rigoletta.
- 116 Black Plume; or, The Sorceress of Hell Gate.
- 109 Captain Kyd, the King of the Black Flag.
- 104 Montezuma, the Merciless.
- 103 Merle, the Mutineer; or, The Red Anchor Brand.
- 94 Freelance, the Buccaneer.
- 89 The Pirate Prince; or, The Queen of the Isle.
- 85 The Cretan Rover; or, Zuleikah the Beautiful.
- 2 The Dare Devil; or, The Winged Sea Witch.

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- 646 Dark John, the Grim Guard.
- 638 Murdock, the Dread Detective.
- 623 Dangerous Dave, the Never-Beaten Detective.
- 611 Alkali Abe, the Game Chicken from Texas.
- 596 Rustler Rube; the Round-Up Detective.
- 585 Dan Dixon's Double.
- 575 Steady Hand, the Napoleon of Detectives.
- 563 Wyoming Zeke, the Hotspur of Honey-suckle.
- 551 Garry Kean, the Man with Backbone.
- 539 Old Doubledark, the Wily Detective.
- 531 Saddle-Chief Kit, the Prairie Centaur.
- 521 Paradise Sam, the Nor'-West Pilot.
- 513 Texas Tartar, the Man With Nine Lives.
- 506 Uncle Honest, the Peacemaker of Hornets' Nest.
- 498 Central Pacific Paul, the Mail Train Spy.
- 492 Border Bullet, the Prairie Sharpshooter.
- 486 Kansas Kitten, the Northwest Detective.
- 479 Gladiator Gabe, the Samson of Sassajack.
- 470 The Duke of Dakota.
- 463 Gold Gauntlet, the Gulch Gladiator.
- 455 Yank Yellowbird, the Tall Hustler of the Hills.
- 449 Bluff Burke, King of the Rockies.
- 442 Wild West Walt, the Mountain Veteran.
- 437 Deep Duke; or, The Man of Two Lives.
- 427 The Rivals of Montana Mill.
- 415 Hot Heart, the Detective Spy.
- 405 Old Baldy, the Brigadier of Buck Basin.
- 385 Will Dick Turpin, the Leadville Lion.
- 297 Colorado Rube, the Strong Arm of Hotspur.
- 279 The Gold Dragon, or, California Bloodhound.

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- 688 The River Rustlers.
- 673 Stuttering Sam, the Whitest Sport of Santa Fe.
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- 666 Old Adamant, the Man of Rock.
- 618 Kansas Karl, the Detective King.
- 552 Prince Primrose, the Flower of the Flock.
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- 517 Buffalo Bill's First Trail.
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- *397 The Wizard Brothers; or, White Beaver's Trail.
- *394 White Beaver, the Exile of the Platte.
- 362 Buffalo Bill's Grip; or, Oath Bound to Custer.
- 329 The League of Three; or, Buffalo Bill's Pledge.
- *319 Wild Bill, the Whirlwind of the West.
- *304 Texas Jack, the Prairie Rattler.
- *243 The Pilgrim Sharp; or, The Soldier's Sweetheart.
- 189 Wild Bill's Gold Trail; or, The Desperate Dozen.
- 175 Wild Bill's Trump Card; or, The Indian Heiress.
- 168 Wild Bill, the Pistol Dead Shot.
- 158 The Doomed Dozen; or, Buffalo Bill, Chief of Scouts.
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- 652 Jackson Blake, the Bouncer Detective.
- 647 The Fresh of Frisco at Santa Fe.
- 637 Joe Phenix in Crazy Camp.
- 632 Joe Phenix's Master Search.
- 623 Joe Phenix's Combin'.
- 620 Joe Phenix's Silent Six.
- 613 Keen Billy, the Sport.
- 607 Old Benzine, the "Hard Case" Detective.
- 601 Joe Phenix's Shadow.
- 594 Fire Face, the Silver King's Foe.
- 583 The Silver Sharp Detective.
- 577 Tom of California.
- 570 The Actress Detective; or, The Invisible Hand.
- 562 Lone Hand, the Shadow.
- 556 Fresh, the Sport-Chevalier.
- 537 Blake, the Mountain Lion.
- 529 The Fresh in New York.
- 520 The Lone Hand on the Caddo.
- 497 The Fresh in Texas.
- 490 The Lone Hand in Texas.
- 475 Chin Chin, the Chinese Detective.
- 465 The Actor Detective.
- 461 The Fresh on the Rio Grande.
- 440 The High Horse of the Pacific.
- 433 The Lone Hand; or, The Red River Recreants.
- 419 The Bat of the Battery; or, Joe Phenix, Detective.
- 408 Doc Grip, the Vendetta of Death.
- 391 Kate Scott, the Decoy Detective.
- 384 Injun Dick, Detective; or, Tracked to New York.
- 381 The Gypsy Gentleman; or, Nick Fox, Detective.
- 376 Black Beards; or, The Rio Grande High Horse.
- 370 The Dusky Detective; or, Pursued to the End.
- 363 Crowningshield, the Detective.
- 354 Red Richard; or, The Crimson Cross Brand.
- 349 Iron-Hearted Dick, the Gentleman Road-Agent.
- 320 The Gentle Spotter; or, The N. Y. Night Hawk.
- 252 The Wall Street Blood; or, The Telegraph Girl.
- 203 The Double Detective; or, The Midnight Mystery.
- 196 La Marmoset, the Detective Queen.
- 173 California John, the Pacific Thoroughbred.
- 161 The Wolves of New York; or, Joe Phenix's Hunt.
- 130 Captain Volcano, or, The Man of Red Revolvers.
- 112 Joe Phenix, Private Detective.
- 107 Richard Talbot, of Cinnabar.
- 101 The Man from New York.
- 97 Bronze Jack, the California Thoroughbred.
- 93 Captain Dick Talbot, King of the Road.
- 91 The Winning Oar; or, The Innkeeper's Daughter.
- 84 Hunted Down; or, The League of Three.
- 81 The Human Tiger; or, A Heart of Fire.
- 79 Joe Phenix, the Police Spy.
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- 49 The Wolf Demon; or, The Kanawha Queen.
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- 38 Velvet Hand; or, Injun Dick's Iron Grip.
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